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WHERE ARE THE HUNTING BOOKS?

by

William G. Tapply

"Where do you keep your hunting books?" I asked the salesclerk at the largest bookstore in my area.

"We don't carry hunting books," she answered.

"Why not?"

"There's no market for them."

I shrugged. There were plenty of other bookstores. I wanted to buy a new book on wingshooting recently released by a major New York publishing house. I've admired the writer's articles in this and other magazines.

The next store I visited carried no hunting books, either. It did have three different handbooks for animal rights activists, however. They were prominently displayed. I thumbed through them. Each contained recommendations for the reader who wanted to promote hunting bans.

One store had a book on duck dogs. I found it in the pet section.

Another carried a paperback on antique firearms.

In a large branch of a national chain, a store where one could

buy a book, seemingly, on any topic the human mind has pondered, I found an entire shelf devoted to flyfishing books. Nearby, at last, I found a hunting book. Just one. Not the one I was looking for, but a paperback reprint written by Fred Bear twenty-odd years ago on bowhunting.

I smelled a conspiracy. I decided to ask some questions. I talked to writers, bookstore owners, publishers' sales representatives, editors, and publishers. I found no conspiracy. But I did find a world of shadows and mirrors, a world whose business decisions are based on a combination of distorted perception, personal bias, and fear.

All of the people I talked with, in one way or another, said the same thing: There's no market for hunting books. Where there's no market, there will be no books.

It starts with the consumer -- or perceptions of the consumer. "Hunters are very discriminating readers," one editor told me with his tongue rammed against his cheek. Another said, "No one's buying hunting literature any more. Maybe the occasional how-to book" A third editor put it more bluntly: "Hunters don't read."

One bookstore owner suggested I look in a gun shop or tackle store. "It's a fractured market," he said. "Hunting is not of general interest." His store, I noted, had shelves bursting with books on golf, tennis, aerobic exercise, and hanggliding.

Another bookstore owner was more candid. "Hunting is controversial," she told me. "We have to be sensitive to the selling environment. Sure, we'll respond to what we see as anti-hunting sentiment among our customers. We don't want to scare them away. We stock and display what's fashionable. We follow the fads. And let's

face it. Hunting just isn't fashionable. In fact, it's the opposite."

"Who says so?" I asked her.

"Look," she said. "Most of your bookstores are clustered in and around cities. That's where people live, right? Well, cities aren't where hunters live. More to the point, cities are where anti-gun and anti-hunting sentiment is strongest. And who run the bookstores? Urban, 'liberal' types, like me, people who tend to be opposed to hunting, or at least have no interest in it. We buy and display and recommend books that we like and that we think our customers will like. We go broke if we take up shelf space with books that won't sell, or that will offend our customers. I wouldn't dare display a hunting book in my window."

"What about hot-air ballooning?" I said, pointing to a book that was displayed in her window. "Is that more popular than hunting?"

She shrugged. "I have a few customers who'll buy that kind of stuff. More to the point, I don't have any customers who are offended by it."

"We won't publish books that stores won't carry," one publisher told me. "None of the major trade houses are doing hunting books anymore. The bias against hunting books in the industry is widespread and growing. No one wants to risk producing a book that not only is guaranteed to lose money, but that might even offend customers to the point where other sales will be impacted."

"It's the free market system at work," shrugged another publisher. "It's simple: no demand, no product."

One editor, who had recently worked on a hunting book,

described his experience. "The book was ignored. It lost money. We tried, but we probably won't do another one. We couldn't even get it reviewed. Our publicity department wouldn't budget promotional money. Sales reps wouldn't push it. Store owners wouldn't stock it. If you tell me you want to write a hunting book, I'll tell you to write something else. This wasn't the case fifteen or twenty years ago. But it is now."

What has happened in the past twenty years? There are more hunting licenses being sold nowadays than ever, so it's not that there are fewer hunters. But there's one thing we know: Twenty years ago there existed virtually no organized anti-gun or anti-hunting sentiment. Today there are, by my count, 63 so-called animal rights organizations. All, directly or indirectly, are working to defame and vilify -- and ultimately to outlaw -- hunting. They are highly organized, well-financed, and influential. They have powerful sympathizers in industry and government. They spend millions of dollars to convince formerly neutral people that sport hunting is cruel and senseless and that hunters are bloodthirsty sadists.

I could find no evidence that any of these organizations has attempted to boycott publishers or bookstores or to censor hunting literature.

They haven't needed to. They've succeeded in creating a climate of opinion that has produced, in the book industry, the same result -- a perception that there is no market for hunting books.

I asked one bookstore owner bluntly if she refused to carry hunting books because she didn't like hunting. She laughed. "I carry Karl Marx, but I'm no Communist. I carry Mein Kampf, and I'm a Jew. I'm not in the business of promoting issues. I'm in the business of

selling books."

If the book industry perceives no market for hunting books, there will be none. "I'm not going to bust my butt trying to write another hunting book," one popular outdoor writer told me. "No major publisher will take it. The best I could do would be to place it with a small specialty house, where the advances are miniscule. I'm not looking to lose money. I'm writing other stuff."

This is discrimination. This is censorship. It's subtle, it's indirect, but it's real. Hunters cannot find books about hunting because, insofar as they even exist, they are not easy to find. This is bad.

Worse, it seems to me, is the impact of all this on the vast majority of Americans, those who don't hunt but have no strong opinions on it. These are the undecided, fair, and open-minded folks, the people who buy books and are interested in ideas, who might well want to know why and how hunters do what they do and why they love it, and who just might want to hear the other side of the anti-hunting argument. They are the victims, too. They are deprived of the literature that could inform them.

In a society that values free expression, opinions develop out of the open exchange of ideas. Ideas about hunting are not exchanged openly today. All of us -- hunters, animal rights sympathizers, and everybody else -- are the worse for it.

I never did find the wingshooting book I was looking for. But several bookstore owners said cheerfully, "I can order a copy for you, if you want."

"What if several folks came in asking for the same book?" I asked one of them.

"We'd probably keep some copies in stock."

"And if people kept coming in asking to see your selection of hunting books?"

"We'd probably make room on our shelves for a selection of hunting books," she said. "If people want to buy them, we'll make them available. After all, we're in the business of selling books."

So that's what we should do. As one hunter/writer told me, "I'd like to see sportsmen all over the country walking into their local general-interest bookstores. The first question would be: 'May I see your hunting books?' If there are none, the next question would be: 'Why not?'"

-- THE END --



Outdoor Writers Association of America, Inc.
2017 Cato Avenue, Suite 101
State College, PA 16801
814-234-1011

3/11/91

Dear Duncan:

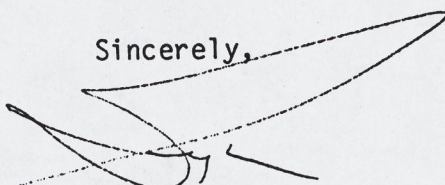
We're going to run Datus' letter as a commentary - pretty much as it has been set in type (see enclosed).

We would welcome a sidebar or whatever from you concerning the importance of the problem and directing readers to the article in F&S.

We'll hold the article for the June issue so it appears after F&S is on the newsstands.

Thanks for helping to coordinate this.

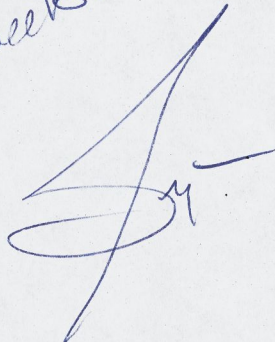
Sincerely,



Sylvia

Sylvia G. Bashline
Executive Director

*Datus - This is what I sent
Duncan this morning after talking
with him last week.*



Bookstores are not ordering hunting/fishing titles

I recently learned that many bookstores in America—and perhaps some book-distribution chains—make it a practice not to order books dealing with hunting. It seems to be a recent practice. It caught me, my agent, my publisher, and at least one other author by surprise.

The first inkling of a problem came from my editor at Prentice Hall. Initial orders for my book, *Pheasants Of The Mind*, were smaller than expected, he said. Prentice Hall's field-representatives had been told by some contacts that the problem was the subject matter, not my book in particular.

I was not concerned at first. The book got a full-length review in the *New York Times*, which I thought would clarify that I was writing to a general readership as well as to hunters specifically. The book has been doing all right where it is available—but it is still not for sale in many places.

A few days later I had a call from **Steve Grooms**, who had written another book on pheasants. It's a good one. By coincidence, it came out at the same time as mine (autumn 1990). Up till then, Americans who wanted to read about pheasants had very little available. Now they have. But Steve told me that he had started marketing his book from home because so few stores had been willing to carry it.

I started to pay attention. I called Nick Lyons of Lyons & Burford books, which publishes many titles on outdoor sports, including Grooms' book and an earlier one of mine. Nick told me many bookstores, ranging from the largest to the smallest, would not order anything dealing with hunting unless customers made special requests. He thought that the general-interest bookstores in malls often avoided hunting books. A smaller number of outlets also avoided books on fishing. It was, he said, getting to be a real problem.

I don't need to tell you that a large part of this country's population hunts and fishes. They buy books on their sports, too—when they know the books are available. But if the books are not in the stores, most folks won't know.

I doubt that any store-or chain-owner wants to be seen as a censor. They may just want to avoid trouble from the small percentage of the population that is aggressively opposed to hunting or fishing. Not stocking books would be the easy way out.

I doubt, too, that many outlets have written policies against stocking sporting books; that would be asking for trouble. I have referred to a "practice." But if millions of people are denied the opportunity to know books on their interests are available, they have in fact been discriminated against.

I would not expect a small, specialized shop to carry books on topics outside its specialty. But if a general bookstore in most of this country avoids carrying books on hunting, it has an anti-hunting policy—even if it has not thought of the issue in those terms.

Maybe it's time to blow the whistle. I'd like to see sportsmen all over the country walking into their local general-interest bookstores. The first question would be: "May I see your hunting books?" If there are none, the next question would be: "Why not?"

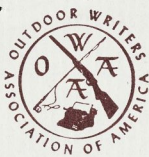
Datus Proper of Belgrade, Mont., is a book author and free-lance writer.

30

this page
is reduced

I wanted an
"eye-catcher" to be
sure everyone reads
it.

Millions of people are being denied books on hunting.



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State College, PA 16801
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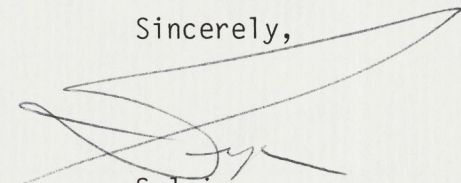
1/14/91

Dear Datus:

Your letter is shocking. Okay if we run it in the March issue of OU? I'll check with Duncan to see if it is okay with him but I doubt if he runs it as a letter. He may want to use the information as an editorial.

Thanks for sharing the information with us.

Sincerely,



Sylvia

p.s. Just talked with Duncan & he's planning an article in April and since that comes out the middle of March, we'll move our date of publishing up to April so we don't step on F&S's toes.

- Copy -

January 8, 1991

Mr. Duncan Barnes, Editor
Field & Stream
2 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10016

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