

Independent scholar

Barbara Russell

First buy your cookbooks: on becoming a cookbook seller

Abstract:

The following article describes the author's setting up, and running of, a speciality bookshop dealing with food writing, and cookbooks in particular.

Biographical note:

Barbara Russell has a PhD in History from Monash University, and a lifelong interest in old cookbooks. She became a full-time seller of collectable and out-of-print cookbooks in 2007. Her immersion in old cookbooks opened her eyes to the possibilities of the material for academic research and has seen her make the leap from post-apartheid South African feminism to Victorian cookery writers of the early twentieth century. Of particular interest is Australian Dorothy Floate, champion agricultural show cook and author of three cookbooks in the 1940s and 1950s, whose formidable prowess in the kitchen provided her with an independent income and made her something of a minor celebrity.

Keywords:

Food writing – Cookbooks – Cookbook selling – Used books – Dorothy Floate

It was a tiny classified ad, three lines long, but it jumped out at me as I scanned the May 2006 edition of the *Bookseller & publisher* electronic newsletter that landed in my inbox every week. A home-based online and catalogue bookselling business, specialising in cookbooks, was being sold by a couple in Sydney. Now, like every avid reader, I had always held vague romantic notions of running a bookshop. However, I loved my job teaching history to first year university students and, having just completed my PhD, was thinking only of an academic career. But something about that ad stuck in my head and I rang my husband, who is also an enthusiastic book collector, ‘You know how you’ve always thought you might like to be a bookseller? Listen to this’, and I read him the advertisement.

A phone call to the vendors resulted in us flying to Sydney for a weekend in June 2006. We chatted with the owners Barbara and John Fisher about the business, Barbara Fisher Old and Out-of-Print Books, and how it operated, and spent time poring over the several thousand cookbooks and ephemera on bookshelves in their Cammeray home.

The Fishers had made the decision to downsize from their family home to an apartment, which meant that the business they had operated for many years would have to be disposed of. While there had been some interest from other booksellers in buying their stock, what Barbara and John really wanted was to sell the business as a going concern, to keep the tradition alive. Our decision to buy the business was probably made before we boarded the plane to Sydney, with the idea that it could be a bit of a hobby, allowing the two of us to dabble in a business which fascinated us and which we could develop ‘when we retired’. Six months after the purchase of the ‘hobby’ business, I made a decision to leave the ivory towers of academia and turn my energy to growing the book business. After trying and rejecting a raft of possibilities, the business was renamed Vintage Cookbooks and I was its sole proprietor and, for better or worse, a bookseller.

So how does one make the leap from being an historian, avid reader and casual collector of cookbooks to becoming a full-time specialist bookseller? How does one work out what a cookbook is worth, how to sell it, how to promote it, what stock to buy? The short answer is that you learn on the job. From the moment we started unpacking the books onto shelves in our home basement, I started to get to know my books. I went to a conference in Adelaide titled ‘Cookbooks as History’ which gave me an appreciation of their importance to fellow historians. As orders came in in the first few months, I started to get an idea of what people were looking for. In the early days I made many rookie mistakes. I sold valuable books too cheaply (when they sell immediately they get listed online, that’s usually an indication of high demand or too low a price). I was told off by a collector in the UK for listing an Elizabeth David as first edition (published in 1950), when it was, in fact, a 1951 first edition, third impression, (which makes a big difference to its value). There was great excitement when our first overseas order arrived from Canada – for two of the ever-popular Time-Life *The good cook* series (1979–1981). Five years later the lady who bought those two cookbooks took the time to visit our shop and introduce herself while on a visit from Canada, which was almost as exciting for me as that first overseas order had been. While I soon discovered that there are very few patterns to old cookbook buying, I began to get my eye in, able to pick what would be a good seller: definitely not microwave cookbooks, or books on 100 ways to cook chicken, beef or lamb.

The database that we had acquired along with the business was invaluable. Containing bibliographic details on every book the Fishers had ever had, this became my template when adding new books and a gold mine of information. Short discursive notes on each book, its contents and the author, were particularly enlightening, small nuggets of information that built up in the related database that is my brain. I learned that the best booksellers describe a book in as much detail as possible, particularly when a customer does not have the luxury of having the book in front of them. The database also gave me some guidance as to the value of many books as I started to expand the collection.

What has really stood me in good stead, however, has been my training as an historian, particularly my strong research background. It did not take long for me to discover that these everyday items were valuable primary source material, and if I needed to find out about them, as with any primary source material, I could use my research skills and understanding of the complexities of such material to build up an understanding of the book and its story. If a customer asked me a question about a book, or an author, or was looking for a particular recipe or cookbook, I might not know the answer but I knew where to go to find it.

My professional background has also helped me to appreciate, as many of my customers do, (but which the casual observer really doesn't 'get') that apart from their great recipes, old cookbooks are a glimpse into the past, a piece of social history. Some of what we learn is related to their function: multiple recipes for rabbit and offal for instance suggest that in early 20th century Australia these were eaten as a matter of necessity, not trend (also quite common are recipes for exotic creatures like mutton bird, although one cannot see it becoming a regular inclusion on the menus of hipster eateries). Contemporary advertising and chapters on kitchen management give an idea of what kitchens looked like, what cooking methods were used, and remind us that long before the term 'locavore' gained traction, every town had its own manufacturer of staples like flour, preserves, butter and so forth.

Cookbooks can also give us a glimpse into arcane and extinct language. A tiny 1930s CWA cookbook from my local area gives a recipe for a dessert called 'Smoodging in the dark' (n.d.), smoodging being a now redundant, and very Australian-sounding, expression meaning cuddling. They also reflect the times more directly: cookery instructor Lucy Drake's fabulous cookbooks contain recipes which place them squarely in war-time Australia, with advertising for War Bonds (1943: 1), recipes for Soldier's Pound Cake (1943: 1a), King Orange Cake (1943: 152) and Cairo Dainties (1943: 181). Genealogists and local historians buy books from me to give them an insight into what their local towns looked like, what shops were in the main street, and whether their ancestor contributed a recipe for Jam Roly-Poly to the Maffra Swimming Pool Committee's fundraising recipe book.

And of course it is not just what is printed on the page but what is left inside that adds to these books' value as historical sources. Multiple stains, loose pages, dog-ears or little ticks and crosses next to recipes, reveal what the most used recipes in a cookbook were. There are also often cuttings and handwritten recipes tucked away inside, which tell about the previous owner and what they liked to cook. In the early days of owning the business, I purchased an extensive library of cookbooks from a deceased estate, which I picked up from a smart apartment in South Yarra. It was a great find: big, glossy tomes, many of them quite valuable, except that every book contained an extravagant signature in pen of the previous owner on the front endpaper and many recipes contained extensive notes on who they were cooked for and

where, and often featured small inked comments about the recipe itself – ‘Magnificent, next time cook at 200’, and ‘Disgusting, tasted like wallpaper paste’. While these additions somewhat devalued the books for collectors, most of their subsequent owners have appreciated, as I do, their guidance and the glimpse they give of the previous owner and his social life.

As my interest in cookbooks as historical documents has grown, so too has my personal collection of cookbooks, with its emphasis on Australian women food writers of the early twentieth century. Alongside the cookbooks written by cookery instructors like Lucy Drake, are those from domestic cooks and minor celebrities like Dorothy Floate. Mrs Floate was a Country Women’s Association (CWA) member and wife of a train driver in country Victoria who was renowned for her success in agricultural show cooking competitions. Her three eponymous cookbooks were very successful, although now increasingly hard to find because of their ephemeral binding. Mrs Floate has become a particular favourite of mine because she boldly self-promoted in her cookbooks and offered endorsements of many baking products, with manufacturers using her name and image to sell those products in much the same way as today’s celebrity chefs do. Notwithstanding the fact that her success is in a domestic realm, I would argue that she also complicates ideas we hold about women of the era, by this self-promotion and through her ability to earn an independent income. While her books were republished in an edited collection in the 1980s, for the most part knowledge about Dorothy Floate and ‘Mrs Floate’s Secret of Success’ cookbooks is limited to those who remember those books in their grandmother’s kitchens. I hope in the future to use my research into Dorothy Floate to write a biography of her and other, lesser known, domestic cooks which emphasises their place in Australia’s cookery canon.

Fast forward to 2012, and I am now entering my sixth year as a full-time seller of cookbooks. We leased a small shop in a village near our home in Melbourne’s Dandenong Ranges in 2008, which has been a great showroom for our stock and a destination for those customers who prefer to hold a book and scan through its pages before they buy it. Our stock has grown from the nearly 2,000 cookbooks and items of ephemera we bought, to over 5,000, the additional stock sourced from deceased estates, auctions, book fairs and buying trips interstate and abroad.

We now have our own online shop as well as selling via third party sites like Abebooks.com and Biblio.com, which aggregate the stock of thousands of booksellers worldwide in one virtual marketplace. Here we stock everything from a 1705 William Salmon *Household companion*, through *Mrs Beeton’s household management* (1865-1960s), to the full range of the 1980s Australian Women’s Weekly Home Library. We sell books to a huge range of customers: keen amateurs come to us for classics like *Larousse gastronomique* (1961) and Escoffier’s *Ma cuisine* (1965); mothers buy copies of *The Margaret Fulton cookbook* (first published in 1968 and still in print) or the original *Australian women’s weekly cookbook* (1970) to pass on to their children when they leave home; chefs browse for hours looking for inspiration from the past. Our cookbooks end up all over Australia, being sold to remote Western Australian miners or Queensland shearing cooks as well as urban housewives in Brighton and Double Bay. And while our overseas trade has suffered with the strong Australian dollar, we still send books to collectors on every continent. Some of our best customers are libraries and museums who turn to our collection to fill gaps on theirs, or commission me to track down scarce items. I have supplied books on loan to movie prop

masters and merchandisers. Graphic designers and artists come in looking for books that fit a particular era or for examples of retro design and fonts.

We also find ourselves called upon to replace books lost through the vicissitudes of moving, separation or natural disaster. Even three years after the Victorian Black Saturday fires in 2009, we continue to help several customers to replace beloved cookbooks lost in the inferno. This is one of the occasions where the shop front is most useful. For many in this situation, it is hard to list what books they had, but they always recognise the spine on the shelf. Every few months I will get a phone call from one elderly lady who lost her collection in the fires when she will suddenly remember yet another book she wants me to track down from the hundreds she lost.

As is evident, there is certainly nothing predictable about our business, and this is becoming increasingly so in the current economic climate. Even in the past six years, the work of a bookseller has changed radically. A cookbook is a discretionary purchase for all but the diehard collector, and there is a multitude of websites, blogs and e-books offering instant access to all manner of recipes. It is no longer possible to just fill a shop with books and open the doors. Consumers have so many possible sources of books that a successful business needs to be operating in every possible medium, and even then, Australian booksellers in particular are effectively hobbled by factors over which we have no control. As I mentioned above, the strength of the Australian dollar has seen our previously thriving overseas trade slow to a trickle. This is compounded by a very uneven playing field in postage rates with a price difference of AUD\$30 or more between the cost of us sending a book overseas and one being sent here. Add to this the proliferation of overseas booksellers offering free shipping, plus those who sell books for only a couple of dollars, and you have a market in which many Australian booksellers struggle to be competitive. The closure of many retail bricks and mortar bookshops has forced the Australian consumer to source many of their books online, meaning many people now turn to the Internet first for all their book-buying needs.

However, all is not doom and gloom. There will always be much sentimental value in owning a book that was treasured by your forebears. A new generation has discovered the joys of cooking and there is a renewed interest in the back-to-basics, home-style cooking implied by many of the books on my shelves. The publishers of a new magazine sought me out for books to feature in a monthly column on vintage recipes, and this is introducing them to a whole new audience. While they may consult the Internet for recipes and ideas, many people still prefer to turn a page and hold a book in their hands. And there will always be 'cookbook tragedies' like me, for whom a cookbook is a source of inspiration, as well as a conversation about food and cooking that I can have with the past.¹

Endnote

1. At the time of writing this piece, in September 2012, it was becoming clear that a bricks-and-mortar retail presence was increasingly unviable. In December 2012, we closed our little shopfront in Kallista and returned the books to their original home in our basement. While the plan is eventually to re-open a shop, possibly in the inner suburbs of Melbourne where foot traffic may be higher, in the meantime, Vintage Cookbooks continues to operate on multiple electronic platforms, including our own website, <http://www.vintagecookbooks.com.au>. Some buyers still make the trek out to our home to collect books and browse the collection. Many still call me up just to chat about cookbooks.

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A scholar is a person who pursues academic and intellectual activities, particularly those that develop expertise in an area of study. A scholar may also be an academic, who works as a professor, teacher or researcher at a university or other higher education institution. An academic usually holds an advanced degree or terminal degree such as a PhD. Some independent scholars, such as writers and public intellectuals work outside of academia. They may still contribute to academic journals and