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**Tim
Martin**



Nothing is better than a free gift, especially in the bean-counting, small-business-crushing, generosity-shirking sphere of literary retail. And while Messrs Tesco, Waterstone and Border didn't get where they are today by handing out stuff for nothing, a recent survey by the online listings service AbeBooks suggests that an almost unlimited trove of useful items – from thousand-dollar bills to strips of bacon – may lurk between the pages of even the most unprepossessing titles at your local second-hand bookshop.

AbeBooks, which lists used, rare and out-of-print books from more than 13,000 sellers across the globe, asked some of its clients to report on

the things they've found inside their books. The answers are extraordinary. One New York bookseller found a handwritten letter from CS Lewis, and a colleague in California found a Christmas card from L Frank Baum, the author of the *Wizard of Oz* books. Other finds were more lucrative, if sometimes for the wrong people: a New Mexico bookseller sold an anonymous microwave cookbook to "someone from out of town", only discovering that it had been full of rare, discontinued thousand-dollar bills from the Thirties when he was told so by the bank manager who authenticated them. Hundred-dollar bills, however, are gratifyingly common: yet another reason to support independent booksellers.

Other discoveries are stories in themselves. One shopkeeper found a hoard of Second World War bank notes – "some Japanese, some German, with burnt edges" – that billowed from the pages of an old dictionary when it was kicked over.

Whole histories of espionage and deceit unfold in the mind at the mention of "a hotel cocktail napkin with a name and a room number on it – from Spain – found inside a 1945

mystery paperback".

Miniature psychodramas abound. "Inside an old children's book," writes a dealer from Illinois, "I found a green card; on one side was written in a child's print, 'I love you, do you love me?' The answer was written on the reverse: 'I hate you and nobody loves me.'"

But this is what we buy second-hand books for, besides price, quality and other piffling considerations. It's these tiny recognitions, this quiet evidence of another mind agreeing, disagreeing or giving up over the very words and ideas we're now processing and leaving its traces behind: underlinings and artefacts, bookmarks and coffee stains. Every book is a tiny club of people who've come and gone within it. And sometimes one of them leaves something for the next.

I treasure the bookmark for Galignani in Paris – "the oldest English-language bookshop on the Continent" – that I found in an old Iris Murdoch paperback: it features a cheerful-looking guardsman, bearskin and all, posing in a shop window, and has migrated happily for months between other, equally tatty paperbacks on my desk.

Sometimes, of course, this works in the opposite direction. One of MR James's most unpleasant stories describes the unhappy fate of two homeowners who copy a pattern from an old book for their curtains, only to find a terrible Thing made of human hair prowling about the house – and though it's rarely so drastic, books and their stowaways can often harbour unpleasant vibes. Just a few days ago I almost dropped a Dover reprint of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* that I'd pulled off a high shelf in an LA bookstore, after it fell open to a carefully clipped square of newsprint

bearing the least cheerful cartoon I've ever seen. In it, a hastily sketched man sat hunched and weeping in front of a smouldering ruin that stretched to the horizon, while underneath him ran the caption: "There is a God ... There is a God ..."

So time to spread a little love, if, in these straitened times, you can still find a second-hand bookshop. The

task of winnowing one's Borgesian labyrinth of text for the second-hand man can be seriously brightened by interleaving a memento or two of one's own, while projects such as Bookcrossing.com, where books are "released into the wild" as online messages, point readers to the park bench or bus route where the errant volume was left, would be vastly enriched by one or two unorthodox addenda. Try to avoid the "condom (unused), cockroach (dead) and strip of bacon" that AbeBooks reports. And if the Hundred Dollar Bill Book Fairy happens to be reading this: show yourself, please. We want to believe.