

Come inside. Get to know the

BRATTLE BOOK SHOP

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Treasures Around Every Corner

BY STEVE HOLT

Tucked away down a relatively calm side street between the Boston Common and Downtown Crossing, the Brattle Book Shop certainly isn't flashy. The interior of the store hasn't been updated in years. Proprietor Ken Gloss rarely advertises and refuses to fight for your attention. He doesn't have to.

The Brattle Book Shop isn't trying to be anything it isn't. That's because it just ... *is*.

Is the best-known book shop in Boston. *Is* a gathering place for all kinds of people. *Is* really, really old.

Walk through the door of the Brattle, and you'll notice that familiar bouquet of ink and paper, some of it quite old, bound with leather and cloth. Next you'll probably marvel at the sheer size of the place: bookshelves lining the walls, packed tightly from the floor to the 10-foot ceilings, and four aisles to explore on each of the shop's three floors. If you're wondering, there are roughly 250,000 books — all good, Gloss asserts — crammed into the Brattle's 5,500 square feet of real estate.

The Brattle Book Shop is one of the oldest antiquarian book shops in the United States.



Clockwise, from left: Ken Gloss, holding a 1958 photo of him and his father, George Gloss, at the shop's Scollay Square location; the iconic Brattle sign, from the sidewalk on West St., the shop's location since 1969; books piled high in the basement, waiting to be priced and shelved.

And that includes the adjacent lot into which Gloss's workers wheel dozens of \$1, \$3, and \$5 book carts six days a week, year-round, except in cases of rain or snow. Hunting for literary treasure out here could take you an afternoon by itself, so pace yourself.

On the ground floor you'll find fiction, art, children's, and war, among other subjects. Climb the marble staircase to

"So, how does the shop work?"

Buy

Someone calls the shop with books to sell. A buyer visits the home or office personally and loads any purchased books into the truck to bring back to the shop.

Sort & Stack

Boxes from the buy are stacked in the basement at the shop. Ken sorts through and prices them according to their resale value. Paperbacks are also separated to be shelved or sold outside.

Shelving

Finding the right place for a book is a time-tested art. Staff members put sorted books in the section where most people would look for that title. Rare and valuable books go to the third floor.

Sold or Sent Outside

Many of the Brattle's books sell quickly. The ones that don't are often marked down to be sold for \$3 or \$5 in our outside lot.

the second floor and you'll find another near-dizzying collection of primarily non-fiction books, from religion to music to classics to U.S. and world history. In "specializing in not specializing," inventory can vary wildly from one visit to the next. If a collection of chess books comes in, for instance, the baseball section may be slashed to make room, the "weeded" books sent outside to be sold on the sale carts. The Brattle's constant rotation of its stock makes walking out with something a near guarantee every time you visit.

Ever wanted to thumb through a first edition of *The Cat in the Hat*? Perhaps hold a brochure for booking passage on the ill-fated Titanic voyage? Pore over mid-19th century maps from the New England town where you grew up? Climb another set of stairs to the third floor, where the most valuable stock — the antiquarian books, first editions, and old sets — are shelved. This is where you may see any number of interesting items. Recent examples include a signed photo of Abraham Lincoln, priced at \$75,000; the 1860 Baseball Players' Pocket Companion, priced at \$12,500; an inscribed biography of George Gershwin with four bars of music, priced at \$20,000; and an original, signed drawing of

macabre artist and writer Edward Gorey, priced at \$6,500.

The Brattle name and Gloss' expertise are well-known all over the country, and Ken usually has at least one house call every day. Every day is different, however, just one of the reasons Gloss loves his job.

"One day we're buying a general estate of used books," says Gloss, who took over the business from his father, George. "The next day I'm looking at a rare letter from Lincoln or Washington, or a first edition of Twain."

As a trusted appraiser, Gloss has been called to value an original Massachusetts state charter from 1620, a signed copy of the Declaration of Independence, and Paul Revere's two-page, handwritten account of his ride. He and wife Joyce Kosofsky identify people's treasures — and duds — as regular appraisers on PBS's *The Antiques Roadshow*.

Searching through the book titles and piles of ephemera at the Brattle, a visitor can easily lose track of time. The scene amounts to a veritable paradise for bibliophiles and a business model that has flourished for the Gloss family for more than a half-century.

From Cornhill to West St.: A Brief History

The Brattle Book Shop is much older than either the elder or younger Gloss — and nearly every other shop in America. The shop's origins date back to 1825 when it was built in the Cornhill section of Boston, later called Scollay Square. In 1949, newlyweds George and Dorrit Gloss, Ken's parents, purchased the struggling shop.

"My parents were about to be married, and my mother had five hundred dollars. They used her savings to buy the store, which, at the time, was on the brink of going out of business," Gloss recalls. "My father built up the business with hard work, his great love and knowledge of books, and a fair amount of ingenuity."

It was George's fearless ingenuity that not only saved the shop in 1949, but built it up to become a leader in its industry. A master at publicizing the shop, George became widely known in the city for the stunts he'd pull before the shop moved locations — which was seven times during the family's ownership. His moving sales were legendary — book prices were slashed in the weeks leading up to a move, climaxing in a literal free-for-all that drew enormous crowds.

Forced from its Brattle Street location by City Hall development in 1969, George drove a covered wagon to the shop's new location on West Street, tossing books to pedestrians, tying up traffic, and shouting, "Go West, book-lovers! Go West Street!" His fiery political speeches on Boston Common and selfless philanthropy also anchored Gloss and Brattle as household names around the Hub.

The Brattle's story has not been without its challenges, however. In 1980, a fire claimed the shop's five-story wooden building on West Street.

"We lost everything; every single old print, magazine, and book," Ken remembers.

Determined to rebuild, father and son, now co-proprietors, found a location a few doors down, put the books they could find out on tables, and started from scratch. Hearing about the Brattle's troubles, many Bostonians lugged books down to West Street to donate to the shop. Even Mayor Kevin White came by with a carload of books.

"The support was amazing," Gloss says. "And we survived."

Yet another lucky break emerged from the smoldering rubble. The burnt-out building was razed, leaving an empty lot. Now next door in their current location at 9 West Street, the lot became a location for shoppers to browse thousands of sale books on carts and shelves. Today, "outside book" sales constitute a major portion of the Brattle's business, and the lot has become one of the iconic symbols of the shop in the modern era.

George's death in 1985 would present the next potential challenge for the Brattle. After growing up in the shop,

however, Ken was well-equipped to carry his father's torch. Ken's style is quite different from his father's. George liked the limelight, while Ken is more private. George ran a tight ship and could be strict at times, while Ken rarely gets worked up.

Make no mistake, though — the Brattle is every bit as efficient and forward-thinking under Ken's leadership as it was under George's. One might, in part, attribute both men's success to the support of



This Abraham Lincoln autographed photo sold for \$75,000.

wives who doubled as business partners. Dorrit worked in the shop until her retirement in 2004, faithfully tallying each day's sales by hand in her last years in the shop. Joyce has taken an even more active role, becoming something of a rare book expert herself. She runs much of the business side of the shop, manages Internet sales, and buys and appraises books.

Despite the challenges presented by the Internet and online auction sites, the Brattle thrives thanks in part to a loyal customer base with an appreciation for the personal touch the shop provides. And all these years later, the shop still doesn't have a computerized inventory of its stock. That doesn't keep some shoppers from scouring the shelves – sometimes stacked two books deep – for the

title they can't seem to find anywhere else (or didn't know they wanted until they found it). For the out-of-town browser who found a few too many books to lug home, never fear — the Brattle offers worldwide shipping.

The People make all the Difference

From the mobs that showed up on free book days in the '50s and '60s to the local supporters who rallied to rebuild the shop after the fire in 1980 to the regular customers — one of whom has been buying books almost every day for a half-century — the Brattle's story is one about people. The Brattle has thrived because of the people it brings together, from its helpful and book-savvy staff to the dealers who gather for a chat around the pricing table — their

water cooler and pub rolled into one.

This book shop, this slice of Americana, is a special place because here, people trump profits. Despite dramatic changes in the world of books and book-selling, the future remains bright for the Brattle. It will continue to buy and sell hundreds of good books every day, leading the way in expertise and service. The Brattle will thrive because of its history and because it has built a reputation for prioritizing people — a reputation Ken and Joyce aim to keep intact.

"There will always be people out there who love books, so there will be a place for a used book store," Ken says. "Plus it's fun. I hope to do this as long as I can."

The Brattle's famous sale lot, open year-round, except when it's snowing or raining



Have Books to Sell?

The Brattle Book Shop buys used and rare books in all fields, from single volumes to large collections. They deal with individuals, lawyers, trustees and libraries. An in-store buyer is available Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m., and they make housecalls by appointment.

Call the shop or visit their Web site for more details:

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