

## Searching For Meaning at the Book Fair

He stepped out of car-interior penumbra and into an atmosphere streaked piddle and nectarine, filling lungs that felt like sourdough with bright Moët air. There were big plaster clouds in the sky, which shined like concealer in the wrong light, and which seemed to threaten rain though only in a cautionary way— unsure, reluctant to act, afraid of their own power and aspect like a spider in the corner that keeps running into darkness every time you get up to make sure it's still where your eyes last fixed it. Under these clouds' dangling feet blew the summoned leisure classes of Victoria along with scabby autumn leaves. The sky was like a migraine—just way too populated with contradictory white wisps and rolling heads and well-defined cumulus' and veins of dark grey—and somehow, amongst all this sugarcane-white, the sun still managed to pour leisurely schooners of warmth down on everyone, whom nonetheless rushed to hold piping coffees to the waterproof exteriors of their overpriced jackets. There were thousands of people paying entry to the book fair with notes scribbled in pen and defaced by tape, fished from expensive leather purses and wallets choked with receipts, pictures of grandchildren, doctors appointment cards, invitations to join Probus. I walked along, letting myself be assumed into a flue of festival-goers, dragged down surely to the entrance, which I realised must be the discoloured marquees set-up at the bottom of the hill near the old historic town centre like a giant dacked arse.

In the midst of this slow-moving, heavily-perfumed, brand-aware contingent, I cut a louche figure, dressed in old black jeans, a baggy t-shirt with some remembrance of past dining on it and a black beanie with old sneakers. Kids milled about everywhere in uniform, looking at me like I was a statue and couldn't look right back at their cherubic devils' faces. Maybe I was wearing someone else's clothes, what with how the crouch of the jeans kept attacking my nuts on the downstroke of each step. Plus it was not unlike me to mistake a female's cotton hoodie for a male's wool jacket in post-somniac fog and to chuck the wrong thing on and walk out the door feeling cute yet slightly vulnerable, although not because of the clothes (the vulnerability) but just because of the general pitch of modern life and its doctor's-room busyness and disinterest in individual affairs.

I smelled a heavy aroma of dust and pickled figs and hoped it wasn't emanating from myself, electing not to sniff under a chicken-winged arm just in case. Owing to my long legs I could, when I'd gotten frustrated enough with the elegiac pace, fire past everyone else, which I did but maybe a little too gruffly, disturbing the thawing tide of people mostly older than me and creating weird eddies of sidesteps and concertina compressions in the bulk, sending looks of recrimination and wounded self-righteousness, little waves that should have barely licked the ankles but somehow wet fringes, everywhere, which I hopped up on and rode, eyes at the sun, feeling momentarily free.

At the gate I handed over a note I was fully expecting my wallet not to contain to a bulldog of a lady and noted my surprise that my drunken cortex had managed to leave a tenner unmolested in plain sight. The woman manning the admissions box squinted at me over magenta glasses, her eyes unbelieving, going back for second helpings and really savouring the ragged long hair and stained shirt.

"You know there's only books in here?" She asked.

"*Only* books?" I replied, "Only, only, only." I walked past the woman fondling my paper ticket— cousin of all those other pieces more significantly drawn—into an optometrist's bottom-of-the-barrel. There were people in horned-rim glasses, because that's what young'ens back in their day wore, and there were people in horned-rim glasses because that's precisely what no-one their age wore; there were people with coiffeurs because that's what movers-and-shakers in their day affected to go out, and there were people with coiffeurs because no-one else their age would be caught dead with their mum looking so preened. People were watching other people watch them drink coffee and sit stonily—readers checking other readers' choices like dogs smelling a new butt. It was, in short, a regular Sunday supercollider event, bringing people from across state and aesthetic lines together, it all relaxed and disinterested except now looking like the different fashion waves and schools of reversion and revision and progression and stagnation had crashed mightily into each other in some profound basin and bled together so that everyone was confused when they saw someone else in the same uniquely affected guise as themselves and couldn't any longer say whether they were friend or foe, imitator or influencer. A dialectic no book on Hegel or Marx could clarify. A question no solitary reader wants to consider over the page of a book they hope everyone notices them reading.

In the corner of one bookseller's domain, balancing on my non-preferred leg while my right hand reached around over my left ear and gripped a handhold in two wooden boards gone out of flush over the years, I found a book I thought might have housed the answer I came for. It turned out to be a book on the irrationality of the quantum, bare and beige with no sleeve. Seemed like the right type. He opened it to a passage about 250 pages in and read: "The nature of spacetime is enigmatic, with no segment of space actually containing no matter at any precisely-defined point. But of course, just because something contains nothing doesn't mean there's nothing there, so even though there's nothing in space there is space itself. So at any point of space, space can be empty except for space itself. Which begs the question, what is space if not another name for the molecules its supposed to contain?" He brushed a lock from his eye and put the chronically confused physicist back on the shelf before he got pulled into the black hole of speculating/ casting aside/ re—speculating. I didn't need any more arrant questions— not now I had at last started narrowing down the field of acceptable answers. The heat in this tiny corner was becoming oppressive, populated by more bodies than a crematorium and the air just as heavy from people bleeding out 100 degree coffee heat through circulatory systems pulsing visibly in the skin. I jostled my way out, ending up with an Essendon Members keychain stuck to my denim and someone's blue eyeshadow on the back of my hand— a sense that the answers I was looking for would be in short supply here, like bread rolls in the 'food court'.

Out in the street, feeling like a curiosity, in a fair for print books, which were largely becoming an affect, a curiosity themselves, a pretext to lure someone back to your house to see how big your bookshelf is, I fanned my shirt out to air the sweat clinging to my ribcage like a U/18 dependent. My first foray into the thick land of words looking for meaning had ended poorly and my spirits sagged habitually. I had several coins in my pocket jackpot-ting around from my entry-fee, so I followed the smell of food and coffee, responding to hindbrain urges for warm, comforting sensations. Relaxing my fingers on the Venetians of high meaning I was trying to peak through for a moment to go inside and masturbate and maybe eat a hotdog. There aren't many higher concepts than the brute fact that pleasure equals good and food and drink equal pleasure. I located the 'food court' with a scan of the horizon which revealed big legible letters shouting 'food court'. I walked into the little staked-off area, a longitudinal gauntlet of smells both foreign and familiar, confused where the 'court' was but not disappointed because there was definitely food being exchanged for hard-earneds in each of the improvised eateries. In each of the trucks, windows, stalls etc sat bored, expectant faces watching potential customers opt for their neighbour's fare instead of their own, causing much latent resentment to boil to the surface like saffron in an oversize paella pan. As I walked in a french pastry vendor was yelling curvy syllables of abuse at a beefy Aussie man with a Glenrowan tattoo on his swelling arm cellulite who was squirting neon mustard, with a distasteful look, onto a man's snag.

"Bloody yank hotdog shit" he muttered under his breath, which the Fenchman misheard— incredible that he even somehow heard it— shouting back over their astroturfed divide "Who you calling ze frog? Not me! I have a rolling pin big enough for your head and not insignificant stomach 'ere."

The big grill attendant's eyes burned like wasabi and steam actually escaped his ears in thin wisps nearly scolding the lady collecting cash beside him, presumably his wife by her comparable dimensions and complementary Kelly Gang ink, and he picked up an oversized pepper off the grill and threw it across the way. It arced massively over the heads of curious diners who, seeing it fly through the air, reconsidered why they had immediately ruled out the hamburger cart as too provincial and un-adventurous for an outing's feed, and landed in the eye of the pizza-maker next door, La Italia Marscapone's yoked head chef 'Bobby', who returned volley with tubes of Strasbourg that he threw with the force of a javelin. Like vomit from deep within the food alley ladlefuls of stew were thrown toward the farrago. Someone cracked a witticism at how would they know what regional dish they were eating with all this cross-contamination flying through the air and muddying the waters and it was off to the races, Bobby hurling cubes of cracker barrel with V8 force at the kebab-maker near him while the girthy aussie man slung skewers at his french foe who retaliated by unleashing a whole industrial bowl of breadcrumbs into the air, which exploded into a cloud that obscured the sun and momentarily bathed everyone in a Western sepia.

Underneath all this, I buried my head and made headway to seemingly the only pacific eatery, a Vietnamese street food van at the end of the gauntlet whose wares were smoking non-violently,

running into and through anonymous knee-high shapes in the breadcrumb smokescreen that bumped and toppled and cried curiously like small children. I couldn't hear too clear though, the muddled war-cries issued in various dialects reducing all other sound to a fuzzy abstraction, bits of produce exploding mightily around me like sudden flak. I ordered a pork bun from the beautiful young Vietnamese girl who knows how much younger than myself who ducked, as I did, a boomeranging segment of cabana, and we met eye and smiled. I softened, looking at her strong hazel eyes, wanting to apologise and explain that Australia is generally considered a highly-developed post-colonial nation with a rich history of diversity and inclusion unmarred by bigotry, but the facts just simply contradicted me.

"\$3.50 mate," she said in the wickedest strain of outback Australian, voiced in the same way a father waves away an annoying kid who keeps asking you to pump up his footy.

Jesus, alright, can't even share a nice moment looking into an attractive strangers eyes. I leaped over a fence, was consequently out of the festival, walked a few steps in the grass and hopped back over the fence to avoid the food fight which I could see had left some casualties lying motionless on the ground half-submerged in Phò (it seemed that the face-to-face encounter with me the young lady suffered through was enough to break her neutrality and unleash some mighty hostilities). It didn't feel any different back on the paying side of the fence, no good-time festival vibes here encapsulating shivers of holism and depersonalisation. No joy of becoming a crowd here, more like the the preponderance of otherness just polished and made your individual differentness more salient. People seemed to be morally offended I was younger than 85 years old and still wanted to read a book, learn things, make sense of the world and even find answers. I bit into the pork bun even though I wasn't hungry anymore, because I bought it and wanted to stop thinking about how dimly unlikely it would be I could find any substance or meaning here, or meaning that wasn't just substances, amid all these pages scrawled with dedications in blue ink ("To my marvellous Mary, have a merry 1975 filled with mirth and fairies"), yuck.

I walked into a high tent that must have been held up by the unbroken mortar of bookshelves spreading concatenated around the perimeter and decided to grab something off the shelf and sit with it, fossicking through its anonymous pages while eating my bun. My face was hot and cold and I worried about catching a cold just for something to do that wasn't reading the pages insipid words. I felt the nap of the cheap paperback pages in my hand, smelt its smell. It said "He walked into a high tent that must have been held up by the unbroken mortar of bookshelves spreading concatenated around the perimeter and decided to grab something off the shelf and sit with it, fossicking through its anonymous pages while eating his bun. His face was hot and cold and he worried about catching a cold just for something to do. He felt the nap of the cheaper paperback pages in his hand, smelt its smel—". Uninterested, I dropped it on the ground and savoured the warm marrow of the pork bun sliding down my throat. I had misgivings about reading too far into the story lest I find no meaning lurking at the end, in which case, I might as well just go home now with a full belly and a whole afternoon to spend getting faded. There were a group of several people about my age in the tent drinking tea and rolling a cigarette—apparently just one to share between three. But if you had seen the size of this durrie- a least half a foot long and as wide as a freshly-baked baguette. They were rolling it from different directions with one in the middle, and one of them on the end inserting what looked like a ceramic mortar but must have been the filter. I imagined the taxation that would apply to such a roll if it were to be retailed and quickly tried to calculate if it would prop up the national coffers enough to start adequately funding public services but I doubted it, a few polliies would just share in its smoky largesse looking down on everyone.

I emerged out of the academic throng reeking of french perfume of uncertifiable legitimacy, such was the craftiness of counterfeiters and the desperation of people wanting to out-dress, out-think and out-pace each other in garish shows of good fortune and spirit. I was sickened. It tramped into my mouth and moshed on my palate and I briefly saw in the air —maybe hallucinating from the pork bun— elderflower and bergamot and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>O molecules gyroscoping so I could, like, see the organisation of the atoms, branches and all, floating in the air diagrammatically. I lurched over to a long bench which must have had its paint renewed recently and held my mouth shut manually, trying not to adorn it with my insides while people looked on entertained eating ice creams. I ladled myself onto its curves and shoved my cold fists into my eye sockets and screwed away until the last of the ghostly images were gone, convoked back to whatever haunted fashion house they terrorised. The nausea vanished slowly with big gulps of air and the un-tunneling of my vision. I felt

renewed but cautious and took smaller steps. I stopped by a rack of poetry books and thumbed through a few verses. The Beats. All taste and bluster and mysticism and good lessons for a world that doesn't exist anymore and can't be resuscitated. It made me feel hopeless. All the meaning they found was dead now, worse, buried so inaccessibly in the earth all you could do was read the well-maintained tombstones and lament the fact they were so legible it was like a taunt, a bird, *The bird*, mounted on the granite. \$1.50, pffft, arm and a leg and half your nackas, am I right? I walk off with Kerouac et al. in my pockets.

Leaping over a bluestone gutter I nearly twisted my ankle and had to dodge several uniformed kids running by with enchiladas and bulky instrument cases. I spied a stage where they would be performing and consciously earmarked it as a hadal pit well-worth avoiding at all costs. I embark upon the book bus instead, which is a bus outfitted on the inside with bookshelves so tightly massed you can barely pull a — out without hitting the back of your hand on the shelf that faces the one you've just taken from. Needless to say it's busier than Turnbull's hands around tax time inside. Loving punishment, desiring the crush, I insert myself into one of the cramped elbows where multiple shelves meet. Around me, singly, people try to fit the shape of their body into the system, or rather, engineer a body-shape that fits. A man sidles past me walking like an Egyptian, another has managed to efface all Z-coordinates and slips out easily. I'm starting to see that if I grab that copy of Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy* I will likely create a shockwave that threatens to launch two pensioners from the entrance door I had lost track of but which turns out to be way behind me owing to the curious mechanics of getting turned around in a dark space. Fuck it, I throw my hand out toward the big tome while watching the entrance behind me, waiting to see the two grey-haired ducks get kicked by an invisible bull. My neck is almost breaking. I'm not even looking at the bookcase but relying on my working memory to maintain the location of the text on the shelf. Just a little further and should see them fly...

"Hey!"

I turn and see blonde hair, adidas leggings, my hand firmly resting on the centre of her arse cheek, making a slight impression in the softness. She whips around and looks at me and is glorious, a dream of homes that don't belong to you and never could, looking like teeth that cost more than a family sedan and hips that could shake at a magnitude 7.1. I somehow hadn't seen her, too occupied with my search.

"Ah, sorry miss." I offered.

She stared at me, sensationalised. Someone was asking if everything was okay and I looked at her hoping she wouldn't scream. She stared back at me with nice blue eyes. Then I realised my hand was still on her arse. I lunged out and grabbed *The History of Western Philosophy* and ripped it from the shelf with all my might and watched as the mathematics of force echoed around the room taking people's bodies as it needed them, adding a one here and subtracting 3 more there until the passage behind me was cleared except for a few impediments I could easily vault.

"Sorry to have met you this way." I said to the blonde whose lip was starting to curl.

"That's okay. Let me give you my number." She produced a ball point pen, grabbed my arm, and stabbed me with all her fury. I ran out the door into the cold nursing my puncture.

Depression started to flag me and I gave in to how I felt. There were more storm clouds overhead now and more strife in the booklovers. A few prominent coffee vans had run out of their precious lucre and now tempers ran short. All the good books seemed to be gone, nothing left but Twilights and Bourke's Gardening Tips. There were still some very expensive down jackets blowing around in the swelling wind though.

I find a book I want "*Practical Tricks To Fool Any Sucker*" and offer the vendor the \$1 it's hastily written in the frontispiece I need to offer him to leave with it but he won't accept it. He tells me it's a rare book printed by a wealthy American card-hand and that the \$1 refers to American dollars not Australian. I offer him a dollar fifty, thinking that will make up the difference, but he tells me the price is not negotiable— one American dollar or nothing.

"Are you sure you need an american dollar for this? Wouldn't two Australian ones be better?"

"Look they might be but I'm not prepared to say at this moment. I don't want to get too political and that's why I maintain the price stays as advertised."

"You can't believe everything you read in a book Sir." I countered.

"Well course you can or it wouldn't be in there. This book says \$1 and the price was written in Missouri when I was there so that's how it stays."

“But Sir it also says on page 43 of this book that Ronald Reagan is President.”

“And that’s true.”

“Was true, was.”

“What was once true is always true young boy, you’ll learn that some day.”

“But—“

“What, you disagree. What was true yesterday is not true today?”

I affirmed that, for the most part, he was correct but—

“That’s enough, one Yankee Doodle dollar or nothing is the deal son.”

I left the book to the septuagenarian and his commodity fetishising. It kind of felt bad to leave such a repository of practical skills including the three card monte and the glim-dropper but, I guess having the book didn’t mean you’d fool the suckers, grease your palms etc. Like how reading about the good life doesn’t give you the good life; or reading about physics doesn’t get you off of this planet run by money; or reading erotica doesn’t mean you lose your virginity. In the end, it doesn’t even matter. All the words in the world, used as deftly as possible, won’t make you enough money to live off of—won’t bring you meaning or satisfaction, and meaning won’t necessarily pay your bills. Words are traded for free or less—in the streets you can be the recipient of a whole string of words for no damn reason. There are people on TV and street corners wasting them prodigiously for no gain to themselves, for no listeners left undistracted and alive. So what if this philosopher said the meaning of life was this or that, you didn’t get to have the meaning of life plopped down on your lap just for purchasing a dusty old book. Maybe I thought all the books in the world held the wrong words, that there was one out in the great abyss somewhere that did manage to line up all the symbols in the exact permutation that provided meaning, like a successfully intoned spell, the difficulty, the duty, was in finding it— the meaning of my life. But here I was in the most suspecting glut of books and these ones were just the same, smelled a little different and had different hand styles in them maybe, but otherwise the same as the glossy mass-trade confections in any booksellers’ window. Where was meaning not mediated by words? What meanings lay outside their imperial boundaries and couldn’t be properly spoke, couldn’t be elegantly contained in these spiky signs and their concepts?

I saw the blonde who punctured me and she’s with some huge lump of meat who I assume to be her boyfriend from the way they are fighting. She seems to be attacking him and he to be easily defending himself with a Japanese instructional book. There are rivulets of people blowing in between them as they fight so they get louder in order to hear each other across the yawning distance. The skies are open for business now and rain falls in blankets that are hessian and near-impossible to avoid.

Last-ditch, I jump up onto a bluestone curb with Kerouac bouncing around in my pocket and grab some old book with no dust jacket or markings and open it. Yada yada, something about “meaning can be found anywhere and in anything- the sighing of a spring rose, the sag of an old fence post- but what is herder to find is the meaning of meaning. What does it mean, after it means?” This looks promising and I read on until realising the author has no answers for his own questions. I’m deflated. Whatever, I consider consigning this author of false hope to the gutter with other titles potential buyers throughout the day have littered along with their takeaway coffee cups and water bottles, then I look up and a girl who looks like every adolescent fantasy is standing a foot in front of me, smiling. I hadn’t noticed her because I was so entranced in the ultimately useless book.

“Oh, I love that one. Such a great piece of work.” She’s gesturing at the book I hold. “One of my favourites,” she says, can I have a look?” I pass her the book and she lifts it to her perfectly upturned nose and takes a deep whiff. “Mmmm.”

“Does he ever works out the meaning of meaning?” I ask.

“Oh, I don’t know. I just love the prose.”

“Oh, so... you don’t know what he’s talking about?”

“Oh, no. I buy books because of how beautifully the words are laid out, not because I agree with what they say. See this book, on page fifty-seven he goes into this marvellous crescendo of hyphenated words that is just transcendent. I have it posted onto my wall to look at everyday.”

“Oh.”

“I look at each word as a little island in the sea of the page.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“Like this book, this one has some incredible islands in it.” She showed me a page and I said the words were inordinately pretty, like you. She mustn't have heard the last bit but passed me the book anyway and said she had to leave. Goodbye angel. I turned it over and saw the front page of *Mein Keimpf*. Jesus, I go to put both books back on their table but look around and notice everyone else casting theirs into the gutters as they run for dry land against the percussive rain. It's so heavy now that visibility is reduced and muddy and all I can make out is the outlines of bodies and their desaturated colours. I decide I'd better leave and fly home to comfort and the warmth of habit.

Walking off the pavement was like what it must be like to leave a fish market, the guts of books everywhere stinking to high heaven of their unique smell, stepping over wood pulp diligently but it still getting stuck to the bottom of your boot turning into mud from the dirt or was it the ink? Millions of words blending into one polysyllabic spew that even thousands of punctuation marks couldn't slow or bring to a full stop. It's all a generic hodge-podge, no word or title standing out amongst the rest, entropy become complete. It flicks up into mothers' eyes as they rescue their children from the mess that threatens wash them away. The deluge is filled with the bins' kitty, write-offs from the international food fight, lost shoes and discarded sunnies, someone's mobility scooter sans owner, clarinet cases and scarves. All the takeaway coffee cups mass in a low area and start to dyke up some of the deluge and people climb on top of it and scan the chaos for their friends and family. The school buses that are parked near the entrance have wet children coughing up unruled pages in them, paper cuts in their young lungs. A crack of thunder prompts one bus driver to start his engine and toot his horn, signalling any straggler to hurry up or miss out. Teacher's stress as schools break apart. The bulldog lady who I paid entrance to is holding her post and trying to pass out memorial pamphlets to nobody. Everyone scrabbles for safety. People are running with plastic bags full of books, their expensive jackets' hoods getting a rare spin. There's screaming coming from the entrance as a bottleneck opens up, bodies becoming trampled in the usurping tide, a child set a-sea in a pillbox hat gets taken by a rip out toward the highway, esteemed authors run from their signings use fountain pens to joust each other away from a rapidly colonised side-exit.

Throughout all of this I've been trying to wrestle with the water level, stay put and not get sucked down to the ocean floor. I see childrens' tears mix with the swelling water making it salty; womens' hair-dye running in the darkening streams. A man is throwing children and girls out of the way—they land with oily splashes in the drink—to get out the exit. Security, what little there is for a book fair, wade towards him with fists balled, as, behind them, a gaggle of the white-haired elderly kick gently about in the water and laugh. I want to help people, I want my life to mean something. I see the chaos disorder everyone and everything until the slate is ambiguous and everything my eye catches could just be phosphenes, ectopic phenomenon. My body feels awkward and, rather than ineptly inserting it into the fray, I decide to keep clear, let the chaos order itself from within. I fall onto my back and float luxuriously. Up above the sky is black tourmaline. I let out a scream and don't even stop to consider what it means.