
The Southwest Book Trader Contemplates Retirement

By Kerry Pechter Thu, Feb 18, 2021

George Hassan, owner of Southwest Book Trader in Durango, Colorado, told me about his confrontation with Hunter S. Thompson, and about his bouts of CRS and CSS.



“Retirement Income Journal? Is that where you’re from? My wife keeps telling me I should retire. My CRS and CSS are getting so bad that I should probably do that,” said George Hassan, sitting in a chair on the lawn inside the low chain link fence around his used-book store on E. Fifth Street in Durango, Colorado.

I was fingering the flea-market bric-a-brac on a table outside the [Southwest Book Trader](#). It is less a store than an uncatalogued mountain of second-hand books, old vinyl LPs, distressed camping equipment and other dusty treasures, all barely contained by the stucco shell of what must once have been a one-story house.

On tables and racks that spill from the shop’s front door, across its narrow porch and into the yard, George sells this and that. A man’s black felt fedora with a teardrop crown appealed to me. It was my size, 7 1/4.

I visit Durango about once a year to see friends and I always visit the Southwest Book Trader. On one occasion, I found a faded Paul Butterfield album in a box of vintage vinyl. George and I were clearly near-contemporaries. We have Pennsylvania in common too. He’s from Pittsburgh. I’m from the Philadelphia area. We both traveled West in the 1970s. I drifted back East, he stayed.



George Hassan. Photo by the Durango Herald.

George has a pirate's arrrgh in his voice. He also has a satchel of yarns that he retells to tire-kickers like me.

I've learned, for instance, about Taj Mahal's performance in a local bar 40-some years ago, when all the well-known troubadours stopped in a pre-Starbucks Durango. The conversation often turns to books and authors. Last fall he told me the one about his encounter with Hunter S. Thompson.

Years ago, the great gonzo journalist walked into the store. With an antiquarian's eye for opportunity, George brought out a first-edition of Thompson's masterpiece, "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas." He asked the Great Author to sign it.

"I was selling that book for \$300," George told me. "If he signed it, would be worth ten times that."

Thompson took the book from George, but not in an appreciative way. "Where did you get this?" the legend thundered, god-like. "I don't even have one of these. This is *my* book."

"No, it's *my* book," George said, gently retrieving it. "But I'll sell it to you for \$300." The mood soured. George set the book aside to help another customer. Thompson stamped out, heading for the Ralph Lauren Polo outlet down the block. When George returned, the first edition of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" was missing.

When George hit the street, he could hear shouting from the direction of the outlet, which was near the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge railroad station. Unhappy with the clothing selection, or whatever, Thompson was dressing down a clerk. The first-edition was in the crook of his arm. George pulled it out and left.

The first-edition remained unsigned by Thompson, who died in Woody Creek, Colorado, in 2005.

I bought the black fedora, which was perfect except for a small hole in the forehead, and a good-as-new vintage fly-fishing vest. George gave me his 10% out-of-towner's discount.

"I should know this," I said, as George handed me my purchases through the twin towers of books and CD cases that frame his office-alcove. "But what do CRS and CSS mean?"

"You write about retirement and you *don't know* about CRS and CSS? They mean 'Can't Remember Sh-t' and 'Can't See Sh-t.'"

"Right," I said.

Then I touched the brim of the fedora and said, "See you next year, George." He'll be there, and he'll tell me another.

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