Yes, I Signed Books at Costco [1]

November 30, 2015 Writer's Life [2]
Bookstores [3]

Essay by S. Lorraine Norwood

Would F. Scott Fitzgerald Sit in a Big-Box Store?



I arrive with thirty minutes to spare. A poster at the front door advertises my book and announces the event. I pause for a moment, drinking it in, until the humidity of Atlanta in the summer drives me inside. For years, I've dreamed of this moment: a cozy bookstore with creaky wooden floors, books piled to the ceiling, rapt bibliophiles walking from one shelf to another, fans queuing for my signature.

I have just enough time to duck into the restroom and change clothes. The three-hour drive in my un-air-conditioned car has left me sweaty and bedraggled. I exchange my shorts and T-shirt for a black pantsuit and heels. With a final application of powder, perfume, hair spray, and lipstick, I'm presentable. I find the manager's office and introduce myself.

"Oh, you're the *author*," says his assistant.

Why, yes, yes I am. An author. My chest puffs. My suit jacket grows tighter.

The assistant introduces me to her boss, who escorts me to the table where I'll sit for the next three hours. Flanking the table are two large posters illustrating the book cover. My name is in large type. Pens, bottles of water, and a

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nameplate alert the public that I'm here to do business. I'm a real, live author with a book to sell. I'll write my customers' names on the title page, sign "Best Wishes," and they can be on their way to the register—where the computer will note each sale and trigger my royalty. Baby needs a new pair of shoes.

"Do you need anything else?" the manager asks.

"I'd love some coffee," I say sweetly.

He points to a display of Keurig coffee pots—hundreds of them on wooden pallets—where a store employee is pouring free samples into small paper cups, the kind used for pee samples.

"She'll help you," he says.

Oh, yeah. I forgot. I'm not in a cozy bookstore. I'm not even in Barnes & Noble with its smell of Starbucks and stacks of easily digestible thrillers. No, I'm in a big-box warehouse that stocks only 250 titles, an afterthought in the world of membership retail, where consumers can purchase everything from computers to caskets.

The year is 2012, and I'm in Costco. Such is book peddling in the new millennium.

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My book, originally published in 2011 by Arcadia Publishing Company, is a photo-heavy local history of Duluth, Georgia, a small town north of Atlanta. The book follows a format dictated by the publisher: sepia-toned cover with over 200 vintage photographs accompanied by a text chronicling the "people, places, and events that define the community," according to Arcadia. The marketing people there have arranged this book signing to interest customers in local history books for Father's Day. Other company authors are participating in book signings across the country at Costco on this same Saturday.

I'm proud of my first published book and my efforts, not least of which was meeting the deadline while hobbling around on a broken leg. The book publication resulted in my very own ISBN number, making me a professional in the eyes of the Internal Revenue Service—and others, I hope. But while my book is professionally written, it's not the great piece of fiction I'd envisioned as a young girl who spent hours at the library in Asheville, North Carolina, every Saturday. I'm an author, yes, but in my deepest heart, I know I won't really consider myself a writer until I publish fiction.

I was 42 years old before I said aloud to a stranger who asked about my occupation, "I am a writer." At the time, I actually worked as a feature writer for a newspaper and had been writing every day since elementary school. But in my mind, I still wasn't a real writer. As a college student fresh out of the mountains, seated at the feet of a writing professor adorned in a black cape, I dutifully parroted his words into my notebook: *Women do not have the competency to write great literature.* A female professor warned me never to marry. Men and children sucked all creativity from writers, she said. Uh, too late—I was already married. I slinked away, sure I was doomed to dishes and diapers, not the *New York Review of Books*.

I also suffered the naïve illusion that if by some miracle I were to have a fiction book accepted by a publishing company, a Maxwell Perkins-like editor would coddle it to fruition until the completed masterpiece hit thousands of cozy little bookstores. In my imagination, I never expected to find myself seated in a warehouse the size of two football fields.

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I've never been inside a Costco before this book signing. I have nothing against the company; it's just that I have an aversion to crowds, and I frequent small local stores, mostly consignment shops.

Here, in this Costco, where I'm supposed to look like a professional, I feel like a mountain rube come to the big city. I am stunned to see a forty-foot-long playset complete with swings, sliding board, and playhouse installed atop a Mount Everest of pallets. There are pallets of laundry detergent, beer, batteries, toilet paper, and woks; racks of clothing; shelves of gift baskets and pet supplies; and original fine art selling for $3,000 or more.

Since I'm in the book section, I wander over to take a peek at the competition. Oh, Lord, it's bad news: two books from the Duck Commander family, one from the patriarch Phil Robertson—*Happy, Happy, Happy: My Life and Legacy as the Duck Commander*—and the other from his progeny, Willie, and Willie's wife Korie—*The Duck Commander Family: How Faith, Family, and Ducks Built a Dynasty.* Both books have been on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for weeks. Next to the Duck books are the latest entries from the scions of the right, Glenn Beck and Bill O'Reilly.

I look to my left for salvation. No hope there. A shiny blue "gazing ball" sits atop a faux stone pedestal. The ball is equipped with LED lights in case you want to sit in your garden at night and contemplate your navel.

Shoppers stroll by, glancing at my table. I smile, try to make eye contact, say hello, and watch them glide past on their way to the cinnamon buns, which are freshly baked and causing me to salivate like a basset hound.

Suddenly, I have customers. Three people stop to talk to me. They're natives, a novelty given the sprawl of Atlanta and the influx of new residents from around the world. In the neighborhoods near this Costco, there are Koreans,

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Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, and Hispanics. In the short time I've been sitting at the table, I've heard five different languages, including Southern (as in Southern accent, ya'll). The three shoppers flip through my book while they're talking, but they don't buy despite my earnest sales pitch.

I check the clock on my cell phone. I've been here ten minutes. Only two hours and fifty minutes to go.

That's when I notice the trash can directly across from me. Made of stainless steel with a brush silver finish, it has an extra wide mouth for large debris and a space-saving design. But the *coup de grace* is the active beam sensor that opens the lid and keeps it open until you've completed your task. "Keep your hands clean and your kitchen odor-free," the box says.

When someone walks by the trash can, the lid pops up, mocking me.

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12:30 p.m. I've sold two books. Two trash cans are gone, bought by two guys who presumably don't want to get their hands dirty.

Two books versus two trash cans. This is war.

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Who are these people? Who beside business owners would buy 260 light bulbs and 80 rolls of toilet paper? Who beside hoarders and frugalistas? And do they even know where the books are displayed?

Well, yes, as a matter of fact. A little research reveals some mind-boggling statistics. Based in Issaquah, Washington, Costco Wholesale is a membership-only chain that uses a simple formula of bulk packaging at low prices. According to the Costco website, it's "the first company ever to grow from zero to $3 billion in sales in less than six years." The company has over 600 warehouse clubs in the United States and overseas (as of August 2014). The National Retail Federation lists it as the third largest 2015 retailer in the U.S., behind Wal-Mart and the Kroger Company—but in front of Home Depot and Amazon.

At Costco, as of this writing, a casket can be yours for $1,299.99. Urns are also available, as are sympathy flowers. And for your mourners? Costco is one of the largest importers of fine wines in the world. But the most surprising commodities here and in other big-box stores are books. A 2008 *New York Times* article quotes Jeff Rogart, sales VP at HarperCollins at the time: "Costco's visibility in publishing has risen to the level of Barnes & Noble and the other big chains," a climb primarily based on one woman—Pennie Clark Ianniciello.

Rogart notes that, as Costco's book buyer for over twenty years, Ianniciello seems to know intuitively what customers will enjoy. She may be the most influential woman in the book business today. Ianniciello picks one book a month to feature in the *Costco Connection* magazine, distributed to all Costco members—a membership some estimates put at more than 60 million in the U.S. alone.

A "Pennie's Pick" almost guarantees that a book will shoot up the charts to bestsellerdom. Make no mistake, however. At Costco, books are treated just like dish detergent and kitty litter; they're not coddled. A book stays on the shelf at Costco warehouses for about six weeks. If it doesn't sell, it can be kicked out in a week.

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1:00 p.m. Two books. Three trash cans.

I've discovered a brutal fact: Costco books are sold at a steep discount. The Costco price sticker on the back of the book says $13.06. My book normally sells for $21.99. I wonder what that means in terms of my take of the total, since my royalty is set by my publisher at eight percent. Baby still needs a new pair of shoes—although I think they're coming from Goodwill.

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I have books in my car, in every room in my house, and in my purse. I am currently carrying the 1978 National Book Award winner, *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius* by A. Scott Berg. It's a detailed account of Perkins's work on the manuscripts of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe as well as many other important American writers. Before I began on my Costco adventure, I would have scoffed at Wolfe and Fitzgerald hawking their books in a big-box warehouse.

I've changed my mind. Were they alive today, they just might sit in this very seat. Costco is such a successful bookseller it's become a big venue on the author promotion circuit. Elizabeth Gilbert, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Lisa Scottoline have all done book signings in a Costco warehouse, as have Hillary Clinton and Vicente Fox, former president of Mexico. Maxwell Perkins would have been on the phone to Pennie Ianniciello in a heartbeat:

Hey, Pennie, I've got these great guys I want to send your way. Wolfe is a big guy, over six feet with an ego to match and a manuscript so big it took Two Men and a Truck to get it in here, but he'll be great. The other guy, Fitzgerald, has

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written a classic, a real classic. He's got a little problem with drinking and his wife is certifiable, but I'll keep the wife and the bottle away from him while he sits in the store.

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Recently, I attended an editor-and-agent forum about the future of publishing. Their message? It's a wild, wild world out there. Brick-and-mortar booksellers worry about the increase in online ordering and agonize about the bottom line, while publishers wail about e-book pricing. Writers, who sweat blood for years on a wing and a prayer, are caught in the middle.

While I mourn the passing of the corner bookstore, I have to admit the world has shifted and people like me, people who sit alone and spin words out of their brains like strings of memory on Professor Dumbledore's memory wand, will comply with the shift or go the way of the dinosaur. Whether my story is told in an old-school physical book, an electronic publication, or a futuristic earworm installed for visual and audio interface with the frontal cortex, it will still be my story.

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3 p.m. Time to move on. The grand total? Eight books. Five trash cans.

I smell a fresh batch of cinnamon rolls. Yum. I deserve a treat.

Okay, I didn't sell a huge number of books, but the Costco experience was useful. In this giant warehouse of consumerism, I practiced promoting my product. I learned that on a Saturday at one big-box store in America you could buy a dozen yellow roses and a chainsaw, cinnamon buns and a gazing ball—and a book about a historic small town outside Atlanta that's now surrounded by subdivisions and strip malls.

On the way out, I pass hundreds of stainless-steel trash cans swaddled in plastic and mounted on pallets. I bite off an outrageously decadent piece of cinnamon and icing. My proximity triggers the motion sensor on a can near me, and the lid raises.

An open-mouthed mocker of creativity. It, too, deserves a treat.

Publishing Information

- "About Us," [4] Costco Wholesale website.
- "Top 100 Retailers Chart 2015," [5] National Retail Federation (*source:* Kantar Retail).
- "Just How Many Americans Are Costco Wholesale Corporation Members?," [6] analysis by Demitrios Kalogeropoulos for *The Motley Fool*, June 22, 2015.
- "Book Lovers Ask, What's Seattle's Secret?" [7] by Julie Bick, *New York Times*, March 9, 2008.
- "Author Signing Schedule: In the Warehouse," [8] Costco Wholesale website.

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S. Lorraine Norwood is a writer living in the mountains of western North Carolina. She was named Western North Carolina Emerging Artist in fiction in 1997 and earned second place in the Atlanta Writers Club memoir contest in 2011. She's the author of *Duluth: Images of America* (Arcadia, 2001). Her short stories have been published in *New Southerner* and *Minerva Rising*. She has completed a historical novel, *The Solitary Sparrow,* and is working on the sequel.

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