

Discount Shelf
By Cavan Bonner

Bio

Cavan Bonner is a junior at Pittsburgh CAPA. This is his first play that is supposed to be funny, and he hopes you think it is as humorous as he does. Cavan spent hours in his local Half-Price Books as a kid, and wrote this play as a tribute to the books that spent too long waiting. His sympathy also goes out to the books that are being given away for free in the back of the public library.

Synopsis

Wilson, Norman, Jennie and Jay are used books waiting for another chance to be read. The arrival of Olive, a new book, brings up insecurities and conflicts that the books have nurtured during their time on the shelf together. Each books had notions of what they are meant to do, and where they will go, but the fate of the books is ultimately in the hands of the bookstore employee sorting through them.

Character List

Oliver- twenties, dressed in brightly colored clothing, not overly self-aware. Has the mindset that he can do no wrong, has trouble being genuine.

Wilson- sixties, dressed in a suit, acts with “professor” mannerisms. Used to being ignored, wants to be seen as smart but approachable.

Norman- thirties, dressed in annoyingly trendy clothing, sports obnoxious designer glasses.

Jennie- forties, dressed in a classy and modest dress, reserved and sensual.

Jay- forties, dressed in out of style detective clothing, aggressive, insecure and observant.

(Lights up on four books. Walls are erected on either side of the stage to represent ends of the shelf. Behind them a sign reads “Discount Books: 1 for 1.00, 2 for 1.50”. JAY is slumped against the wall of the shelf, a cigarette held casually between his lips. JENNIE is held in his embrace. WILSON stands, pacing. NORMAN leans against the other side of the shelf, staring at the ground in disinterest.)

Wilson
(Lost in thought)

Abstract

(Beat)

This article proposes an alternate model... (Mumbling) I qualitatively examine how the quantitative evidence is gathered... (Another bout of mumbling) How, if at all, does pedagogy influence the narratives of alternative models that seek to remedy these urgent questions? I ask if the-

Wilson. Norman

-Recursive theory- yes, Norman? Wilson

When are you planning on stopping? Norman

Stopping? Wilson

This is the 14th time that you have started at the abstract. And read the notes. Norman

Excuse you! I need to stay sharp! Wilson

Sharp for when? Norman

Well a... a teacher might need to use me to lecture... Wilson

What teacher would that be? Norman

(Wilson falls silent, slumps against that wall.)

Jay

So this book, the movie edition of the original novel, has the nerve to think he can cheat with the Agatha Christie novel. Well, the Victorian adventure novel isn't going to have that. He figures that's what private eyes like me do, which unfortunately is true, which is spy on people. Which normally I would do, but come on, I knew he was hot for number 58 of Nancy Drew!

Jennie

Nancy Drew?

Jay

The novels in the mystery section are notoriously dirty, but Christ, Nancy Drew is for teens!

Jennie

Jay, I think you get far too judgmental of other used book's reading lives.

Jay

Well, once I get out of here I won't have to deal with intrigue.

Jennie

Yeah...

Jay

All I want is to be a nice evening read one last time, then cozy up in a warm reading room bookshelf and retire.

Jennie

And how do you plan on spending this retirement?

Jay

Well, if I had any say in the matter I would spend my days with you.

Jennie

But...

Jay

Well, we both know how it is. Two different genres...

Jennie

An erotic fiction anthology...

Jay

And a detective thriller...

Jennie

Why don't we make the most of the time that we have, then, Jay?

Jay

What do you mean?

Jennie

I mean, why can't you stop with your stories for once and have a moment with me for once?

Jay

Jennie...

Jennie

Jay, for the life of me, why do you always pull away like this when we are getting intimate? Can you not do yourself a favor for once, or will you always insist on being a broken, misunderstood man?

(Jay is cut off by a thundering sound. All books look up.)

We all know what that means...

Norman

Wonder what *joke* it's going to be this time.

Jay

If I recall, the joke was you last time, Norman.

(OLIVER, a brightly colored coffee-table cookbook, "slides" to the center.)

Oliver

(Nervously)

Hey guys... its me... Oliver. *Recipes from the Young Voices of Poetry*, published in 2010, ISBN is 978-0631228783.

Wilson

Poetry?

Oliver

Oh... um yes well of a sort.

(Wilson steps forward to shake Oliver's hand)

Wilson

My wife was a book of poetry. It's always exciting to meet a young person carrying on the tradition. Back at the University Library-

Norman

(Interrupting Wilson)

-Poetry and... recipes?

Oliver

(With enthusiasm)

I am privileged to have a quirky and unique premise, indeed. Each recipe is written as a poem, all contributed by 30 poets under the age of 30.

Norman

Oh, so you're a... coffee table book? Well, this is the shelf where most of them go...

Oliver

Coffee table book? No, I am a cross-genre cookbook. This is the cookbook section, right?

All other books

Cookbook Section?

Jennie

Olive, take a good look at me. What type of book do I look like?

(Olive looks curiously at Jennie, his young eyes widen in realization.)

Oliver

You're a... a...

Jennie

I am an anthology of erotic literature. My publication was tragically under advertised and went largely unnoticed, though I contain early works from some of the dominant voices of the genre.

(Jennie sighs deeply, and nods solemnly towards Jay. She wants to say more but is refraining.)

Jay

Blood on the Black Ice, detective novel. Before your time.

Olive

Is anyone here a cookbook? An interdisciplinary cookbook? A book about cooking? About cookbooks?

Wilson

Do I look like a cookbook?

Oliver

No... not particularly...

Wilson

I contain a 300 page analysis of the evolution of legal rhetoric, containing an innovative intersection of qualitative and quantitative methods that seeks to construct a new model to...

(Wilson takes a deep breath)

Sorry. I don't get to talk a lot about my research. It really impact all of us, if the public would just listen I could-

Norman

Hi. I'm Norman.

(Olive turns to Norman, somewhat surprised that he just interrupted Wilson. Norman forcefully shakes Olive's hand.)

Oliver

So what do you do?

Norman

I am... a misunderstood book. I am not academic enough to be research... and not mainstream enough to be with the other books. Someday someone will see the brilliance with which I was brought into existence by-

Jay

He is a book on urban legends.

Wilson

And a poorly sourced one.

Norman

I am a detailed, well-researched reference book cataloguing a variety of phenomena...

Oliver

What phenomena, exactly?

Norman
(Dramatically)

Some scholars would call them... urban legends.

Wilson

Scholars?

Norman

That's one word for them!

Oliver
Ok, ok... so... where am I again?

Wilson
The used bookshelf.

Jay
The bottom row of the used bookshelf.

Jennie
In the very back of the miscellaneous discount book room.

Wilson
Once they rested a Lord of the Rings poster on our shelf for a month.

Jay
Welcome to the discount life. Welcome to waiting.

Jennie
For the low price of one dollar, who could refuse us?

Jay
One dollar and fifty cents for two...

Wilson
Jay, Jennie and I have been here for some time. Patrick, the literary fiction book you bring on subways to pick up girls, finally got away last month. Norman arrived two weeks ago.

Oliver
Well... how long can I expect to stay here?

Jay
That depends on... how well qualified you are for purchase. Which hard to tell, on a shelf like this.

Norman
Why are you here?

Oliver
Pardon?

Norman
How did a young, promising book like you end up in a place like this?

Oliver

I was given as something of a gag gift, I suppose you could say. To an incoming MFA student.

Jennie

What went wrong?

Oliver

They showed up to a dinner party with one of my dishes... the embarrassment I caused prevented any chance of being used again. I didn't even get bookshelf space after that. I lived in darkness, without a bit of light for months on end. I only have been freed because of spring-cleaning.

(Oliver takes a moment to collect himself, he has worked himself up quite a bit and is on the verge of tears.)

It was the cake... the flowery language describing just how much of each ingredient to add was a disaster waiting to happen.

(Oliver stares at the ground in self-consciousness. Jennie and Jay share a look; they know the outlook for Olive is grim.)

Norman

Well, I don't envy your chances.

Wilson

Give the kid a break. No respectable book of any genre would envy the odds we have.

Jay

It's not as if you have any authority to speak with, just because you are not longer the newest book. How many times have your been browsed, Norman? Like, actually picked up?

Norman

Once, but I *am* the newest.

Wilson

14.

Jennie

29.

(Thunder rumbles dramatically to signify the approach of a human. The books all look up. The lights focus on Jay as his steps forward to one end of the stage, opposite to Jennie. He stands on his tiptoes, with a look of triumph.)

Jay

This is the 45th time that I have been checked out. The 45th! 45 times, for the most well written, most appealing of all of us assembled here!

(Jay pauses, he has reached his breaking point and is now letting his pent-up resentment out.)

I am a quick and well-paced read that requires little commitment, yet I contain a plot driven, action filled story with an emotional heart. I tell a timeless narrative in a cunningly crafted setting. My author spent too damn long just to have me remembered as a one-off thriller! We are all doomed!

Wilson

Some books get more excited than others when someone decides to browse them.

Jennie

It looks like he has been waiting to give the blurb for a while.

(Jay flops dramatically onto the floor on his back.)

And look at this cover! An airplane zips through the night sky; below the grimy city is covered in snow. Our brave protagonist looks onward-

(Jay rolls onto his stomach.)

And this blurb, this quality blurb! "Robert Griffin is back on the snowy streets again, against his best intentions. The dark allure of-"

(Jay is flipped upwards. He takes a deep breath to calm himself down.)

Jennie

Are you done?

Jay

That was...

(Jay begins to "slide" across the stage.)

Jay

Wait, where am I going? Am I going to be freed? Finally? Jennie, I- I loved our time together, but I know that a grand adventure awaits me, and I am sure you will be happy for-

(Jay is placed down at the opposite end of the stage, right in front of Jennie. Jennie shakes her head, disappointed that she expected something from Jay. She is dragged in front of the other books with a frown on her face.)

Jennie

The Hottest Winter Night, Acrobats Will Break Your Heart, Back Where We Began, Out The Door, The Sweater He Left Behind- all great stories. All won accolades. The flowery language and vivid descriptions make for the ideal steamy fix.

(Beat)

Nobody ever flips to them. They are flipping to *The Greyhound Departs Tonight*- who thought it was a good idea to put that story first! The first page of it was even dog-eared!

(Jennie is put right beside Jay.)

Jennie

Well, this is awkward.

Jay

I concur.

Jennie

I don't know what I was expecting.

(Wilson is picked up, he looks noticeably unexcited.)

Wilson

Well, looks like we have a browser. For whatever reason. I have no clue why anyone would want to browse the books of this shelf for fun.

(Beat)

Ok, so they have flipped to the Abstract.

(Beat)

Didn't finish. Now they flipped to the Methods section.

(Beat)

And now the author bio. Most unsexy photo of an English Professor ever.

(Wilson is laid on top of Jennie and Jay.)

Wilson

And, we are done. I wasn't expecting that to last so long, honestly. Sorry guys.

(Silence, the books wait in tension to see if the browsing is to continue. Oliver is propped up against one of the walls, face first. He suddenly is very uncomfortable.)

Oliver

I am being...

Norman

Read, before me? Why am I surprised by the lack of respect for seniority or importance among browsers these days... sometimes I wonder if I would even want to be brought home by these types of people.

Oliver

No, I don't think they are even reading me... just stroking the text on my back cover? Whoever thought it would be comfortable for me to have the text on the cover be textured...

Norman

Filthy casual browsers...

(Oliver turns the other way, still leaning against the shelf wall at an angle.)

Oliver

Flipping, flipping... are they going to... read me?

(Beat)

Are they?

Wilson

Just looking at the pictures?

Oliver

Yes, they just flipped through 60 full color pages in under two minutes.

(Oliver is flipped around so his face is pressed against the bookshelf, he groans. Norman stiffens with excitement as he is dragged across the stage, slowly at first and then faster, till he slams against the wall. A ladder should be placed by the stage. Norman begins to climb the ladder with exaggerated slowness, to represent him being removed from the shelf.)

Norman

Finally, somebody understands the transformative and profound wealth of knowledge that I possess within me! The whole of you were fools to doubt my-

(Norman is "removed" from the shelf.)

Jay

As much as I want to be out of here, now more than ever, I can't help but feel gratitude over our loss.

Jennie

I guess I am stuck even *more* with you.

Oliver

Can we at least be glad that someone here benefited?

Wilson

Now is not a time to argue, and nor is it the time to celebrate... again, it is a time to wait.

(Wilson leans back with exaggerated disinterest at what has just occurred, just then he stiffens up and is dragged across the stage.)

Wilson
(Climbing ladder.)

Or... or not!

(Wilson exits.)

Jennie
Something is not right about those two leaving one after another...

(Jennie moves to the ladder.)

Jennie
There is something even more wrong about me following, but I am going to a better place!

(Jay strides confidently across the stage.)

Jay
Our travels continue together whether we like it or not, Jennie.

(Jay follows; Oliver moves to stand in the middle of the stage, alone in awe at his good fortunes.)

Oliver
Who knew that all of our fortunes would turn so dramatically?

(Oliver practically leaps across that stage, extruding youthful energy and enthusiasm.)

Oliver
(Climbing the ladder.)
I can only imagine how diverse and adventurous the library of our new owner is going to be!

(We fade to black. Overwhelming blue light brings us out of darkness, bathing the stage. The two sides of the shelf have been removed, leaving the stage bare. The books shuffle in one by one, in the order that they left.)

Norman
We were leaving... how have we arrived so soon?

Oliver

What is this place? Are we home now?

Jennie

What's that?

Jay

What's what?

Oliver

Are you talking about the three white arrows that are pointing to each other?

(The recycling sign is projected over the stage. The books circle around in confusion, all save Wilson, who is standing still with a detached expression.)

END