

# Tim Waterstone

Born 30.5.1939.

Available online at [www.livesretold.co.uk](http://www.livesretold.co.uk)

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*This life story was archived from internet sources by Alex Reid in January 2021.  
The source material is archived with acknowledgement and thanks.*

# 1. Childhood

*This and the following chapter are excerpts archived, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Tim Waterstone's autobiography *The Face Pressed Against a Window*, published by Atlantic Books in 2019.*



*Tim Waterstone, aged four.*

During the winter of 1942, my father was expected home on leave from his latest wartime posting. Then just three years old, I was beyond thrilled at the prospect of seeing him, filling the time until his arrival drawing special pictures ready to greet him.

And then one day there he was, in his uniform, standing in the hall. My father. Except, of course, that he was a complete stranger to me. I had expected that he would reach down to pick me up, but he made no move to do so. I handed him my pictures. And then I did something that may well have served to change the rest of my childhood — perhaps even my life. ‘Go away!’ I told him. ‘Go away. We were happy without you. Go away.’

He stood there, quite still, staring at me, horrified. He was clearly appalled. So was my mother. So was my sister, then aged 11. So was my brother, aged eight. So, no

doubt, was the dog. I seem to have eradicated from my memory what happened next. I think my mother may have hit me. And who could blame her?

She would have understood only too well the root cause of this catastrophic insult to my father. With him away at war for all the years I had existed, I had, from babyhood, frequently slept in her bed. But now, each time he came home, this stranger, this big, uniformed man, would be with her there instead, in my place.

My father stayed with us for perhaps ten days before his leave was over. The day before he went, I was in my pyjamas and just about to go up to bed when I saw him sitting in his chair, reading a newspaper, waiting for supper.

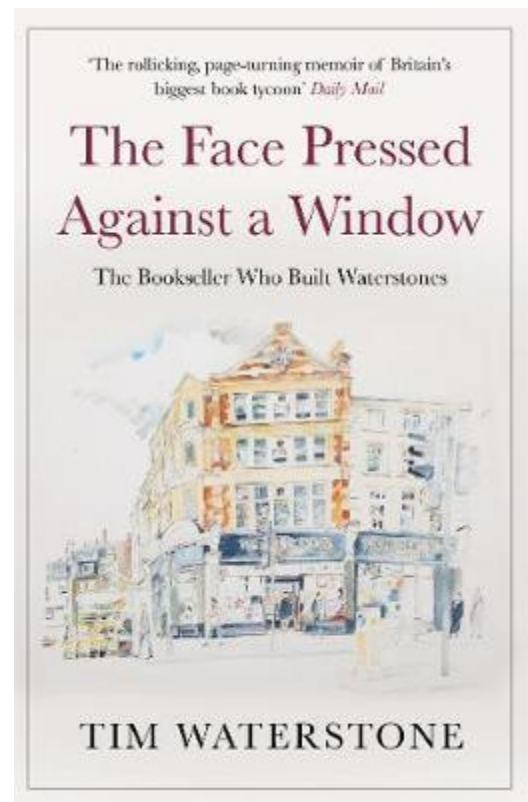
Suddenly, unexpectedly, a wave of affection for him came over me. I knew I had done wrong when he first arrived and I wanted to make it up to him. I went over and stood in front of him, reaching out my arms. But he shrank back into his chair and pushed me roughly off with both hands. ‘Men don’t kiss,’ he said. I pulled back, horror-struck. All I had wanted was for him to reach out to me and perhaps touch my hands for a moment. I was three years old. That was all I wanted.

Young as I was, the snub — the spurning, coarse, insulting rejection of it — hurt. It hurt desperately. And his action that day seemed to set into being the future pattern of our relationship.

From that moment on, he never once attempted a physically affectionate gesture towards me. Not once. I saw other children laughing with their fathers, being picked up, swung about, pushed on swings, kicking a football, carried on shoulders. I wanted that for us, too. But never in all the years of my childhood did he as much as touch me, nor give me any praise. Nor, if it comes to that, did he in my adulthood.

I will never understand why. Perhaps my arrival in the world, way after my siblings, had been an unplanned disaster. Maybe he resented the affection my mother so openly lavished on me. Maybe it was my rejection in that dreadful incident in the hallway. Whatever the reason, he and I spent all those years of ours together in mutual, numbed dislike. His weapon of choice — the weapon that no child can weather or combat — was sarcasm. Endless, witless, brutal sarcasm, mostly directed at me. And so the direction of my childhood was established.

Later, by the time I was 13 or 14, I had learned how to withstand the worst of his attacks. And by the time I was 18, and on the point of leaving home, they had become little more than a distraction, an echo from the past — something I could now put aside and forget about. But what had been done had been done. My father



had damaged me and the damage had stuck. It's still there. One legacy — and it is absurdly trivial — is that I cannot to this day watch a Fred Astaire film, so alike did he and my father look.

But a second legacy — and this is anything but trivial — is that without the trauma of that relationship, I truly believe I would never have broken out and fought the battles I did to create and succeed with Waterstones. That wasn't just for me. It was for my father, too. Waterstones was me having the last word. Why else would I have named it after me? And, of course, it was named after my father as well. I was hurling bottles at my childhood, which I could neither forgive nor forget. Waterstones, pure and simple, was aimed at my father. Well, that's what a therapist told me a few years ago. And he was right.

In our house, there were just three books when I was growing up: a Pears' Cyclopaedia, an illustrated volume entitled *Our Heroes Of The Great War* (of which I was particularly fond) and a handsome, abridged version of Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The rest of the bookcase in our sitting room contained my mother's knick-knacks: little china figures, a pair of glass ducks and a tiny brass bell.

But in the middle of our village of Crowborough, East Sussex, was a bookshop called *The Book Club*, which opened for business shortly after the war. It was to become a major influence in my life. The owner was the dauntingly severe Miss Santoro. During my frequent visits, I would often hear her being coldly unhelpful with her customers' less-than-informed enquiries. But, once she got used to my incessant presence in her shop, Miss Santoro treated me with immense kindness, smiling when I arrived and providing me with a bench that she pretended was reserved just for me.

Often pointing me in the direction of titles she thought I would like, she was angry with me only once: when she saw me lick a finger before turning a page. I still think of that — and her — if I ever catch myself doing it now. I don't think I ever bought a book from her in all those years, although I certainly should have. I am sure I never thanked her properly at the time for her enormous kindness to me. I do so now, with heartfelt gratitude.

And I do so particularly as I have no doubt at all that it was Miss Santoro who kindled within me the bookseller vision that, three decades later, emerged into life as Waterstones.

The values that later became our stores' very lifeblood were being tested out there and then before my eyes: the well-stocked shelves, the comfort and warmth of her shop, her extraordinary personal knowledge of books, her close links with the community. Had she lived long enough to see it, my suspicion is that she would have watched me driving Waterstones into existence without a single ripple of surprise.

But my much-loved visits to *The Book Club* were a treat mostly for the school holidays. The reality was that these were colonial times and, in the early spring of 1946, my father was sent back to India by the tea-growing firm that employed him, while my siblings and I were packed off to boarding school.

I recall all too vividly, aged six, watching my parents' ship drawing away from Tilbury docks, taking my mother away for what I had been told was to be 'just' two and a half years, but what sounded to me as good as for ever. I am not sure I have ever again experienced a moment of such despair.

My home until their return was to be Warden House, a dreadful, cheap boys' prep school on the outskirts of Crowborough, which was, even by the low standards of those days, an absolute disgrace. It was, for want of a better word, a near brothel of sexual abuse.

I know that in the current climate, that sounds rather dramatic. But, just a few years ago, I learnt a most salutary lesson. I had been interviewed by a journalist from a major academic journal, who was there to ask me about my childhood education. In my description of it, I was painfully jocular and trivial and false about the things that had gone on at Warden House, along the lines of: 'All that stuff never did me any harm!'

After the interview was published, a letter was forwarded to me by the journal from the wife of a California-based academic. In it, she told me that her husband had been at Warden House as well, a little after me.

She went on to explain that she profoundly resented the trivial manner in which I had treated the sexual abuse at the school in the interview, as if it had been an amusing little eccentricity at an eccentric little school. And here was the dreadful thing.

She told me that her husband had, ten years or so before, killed himself while only in his 40s. Killed himself, she said, because he had been destroyed by the sexual abasement he had been through at Warden House at the hands of the headmaster. Despite years of therapy, he had never recovered.

In truth, I don't think that all this was a great source of damage to me. But I emphasise not to me, for it clearly was to others. Somehow, I accepted it as a part of life — I didn't at all understand what sexual appetite was about and, anyway, what upset me far, far more than this was the unrelated fact of having my mother away from me in India for such a devastatingly interminable time.

Others couldn't put it behind them, however, and absolutely didn't, as I saw in those letters. They were so critical of me, and I accept that the criticism was deserved.

The school eventually closed down, I think in the early 1970s, and the buildings were sold off as a care home. But it should actually have been closed down in my time there, and could have been — by us boys ourselves.

The story had evidently leaked to the extent that a team of inspectors from the Department of Education descended one day on the school and interviewed each of us boarders, individually and separately. And we all lied — each and every one of us. Anybody who spoke out to these officials would, in our view, be a traitor and a sneak.

And so the inspectors went away again. They had contributed to their failure by the aggressive manner in which they questioned us, without doubt. By the standards of today, their interrogation technique was crude and insensitive beyond measure. But off they went anyway and the headmaster carried on, just as before.

When my parents at last returned from India, I was dispatched to a new prep school — maybe they had heard the stories — and then, at the age of 13, to Tonbridge, a private school just a few miles from our home.

There, I fitted in fairly well, being a middle-of-the-road games player and middle of the road, too, in the classroom. My housemaster's report at the end of my first year was near the mark: 'Not, I think, a boy of advanced ability in any direction, and mildly subversive, but he does perfectly well.'

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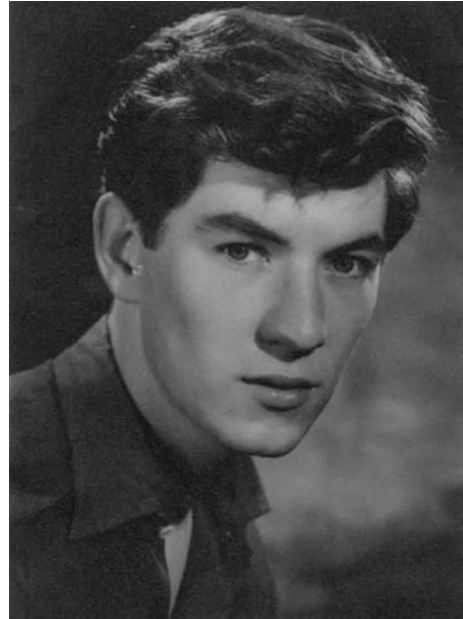
## 2. Cambridge

Despite all this, and despite my mother's hope that I would become a doctor like my sister, I made up my mind that what I really wanted to do was go to Cambridge and read English. I faced up to it and told my mother the news.

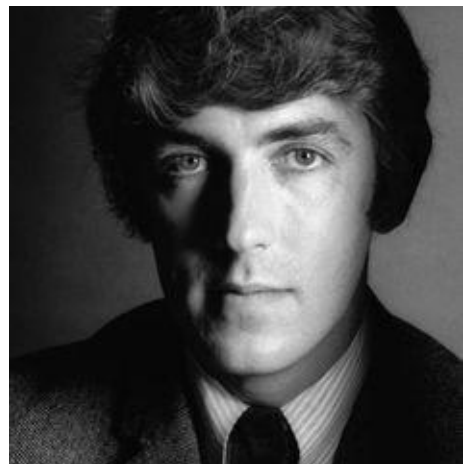
She was disappointed, but placated by the thought that if I managed to get in, she would have two sons at the university, as my older brother, David, was already there. And that would be something to talk about — with faux modesty, of course — at her golf club committee meetings.

So I self-crammed, desperately, sat the Cambridge entrance exam and was eventually offered a place at the small, beautiful, central and welcoming — but perhaps rather less than academically distinguished — St Catharine's College.

Among those in my intake was Ian McKellen (right) — like me set to read English — and I was paired with him for our weekly tutorials. We had stood in a group, looking at the notices to see who was teamed with whom, and, when he saw his partner was me, he came up in his roll-neck jersey, smiling, to say 'hello' in a pronounced Lancashire accent. I found him to be friendly and gentle and modest, and we had a very pleasant acquaintance.



Also among my contemporaries was Peter Cook (right), who declared one day that he liked my rooms at St Catharine's more than his own on the other side of the road from us at Pembroke College, and, for two or three weeks, he pretty well moved in with me. He used me as a stooge for his private rehearsing, either in the learning or perfecting of a script, or, just as often, in his wild drifts into experimental (but, as I saw, often quietly rehearsed) improvisation.



All round, I made happy acquaintanceships and one or two lifelong friendships in those years. An embarrassment, however, was the awful third-class degree with which I slunk away at the end of it (this subsequently a matter of constant glee, joy and gloating from my very unkind children).

You could say that, for that reason, my time had been wasted, but it absolutely had not. I loved — and, in my own way, used — every single day of my time at university. I read absolutely prodigiously, in the company of people who also read



absolutely prodigiously, and we talked and talked and talked. How can that be wasted time?

And, vitally, I spent a great deal of time browsing in Heffers, the city's vast academic bookstore. For it was in Heffers one term-time afternoon that my moment of epiphany came to me — the epiphany as to what, in time, I would do with my working life. Because that afternoon, I stood there in the store, staring round, enraptured, and, when a friend passed by, I told him that one day I was going to do this — like Heffers, but better than Heffers: the best in the land, and all over the land.

He reminded me of that very recently, delightedly, when we met at a Cambridge dinner as we are now: old men. That was a stunning moment of sudden, unexpected, joyful clarity. I was very lucky to have had it at such a young age and the moment it came, I knew that it was true.

That epiphany gave my life a personal goal, however unattainable it would seem for many decades to come. The dream that had been born in Miss Santoro's bookshop all those years before was a step nearer reality.



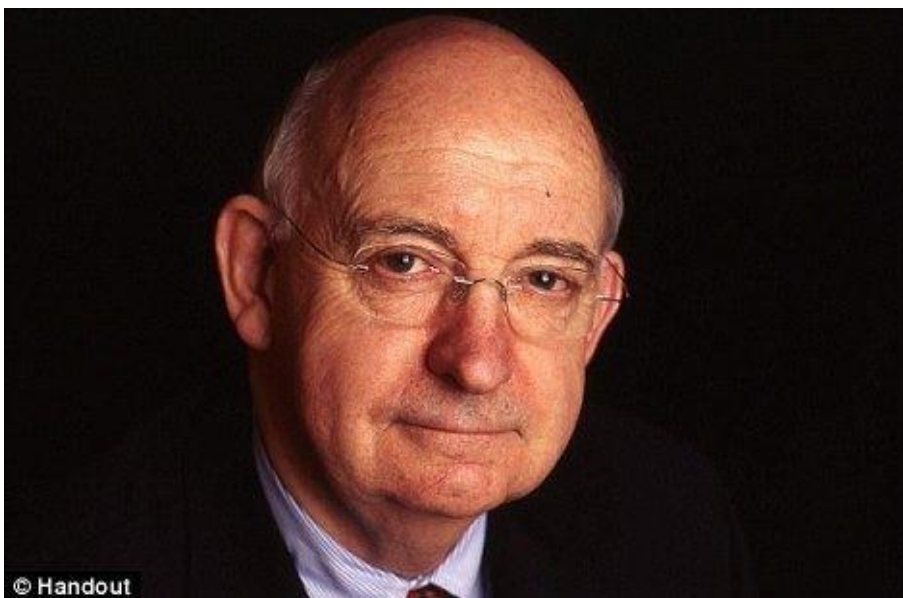
*St. Catharine's College. Cambridge.*

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### 3. Waterstones

*At the age of 42, Tim Waterstone emptied his bank account and launched Waterstones with a view to bringing a quality bookshop to every town. In an interview with *The Big Issue*, archived here with acknowledgement and thanks, Tim explains how his success improved the cultural health of the country. The interview is by James McMahon, and was published on March 8, 2019.*



My family only owned three books when I was growing up,” recalls Tim Waterstone, businessman, author and philanthropist, but perhaps most notably, founder of Europe’s biggest bookchain, Waterstones.

“One was called *Heroes of The Great War*, which was an illustrated book about people who’d won medals and things. The other was an encyclopaedia sponsored by Pears soap. And the third was an illustrated copy of Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop*. I still have that one. God knows how it’s survived all these years and all the moves.”

By six, Waterstone was reading confidently; “reading reading reading” as he puts it. By “10 or 11” he was helping out in his local bookshop, *The Book Club*, in his home village of Crowborough in East Sussex.

“I’d get on my bike and deliver books to little old ladies who’d placed orders,” he laughs. “I loved how much pleasure the deliveries would give them.” He sighs. “I actually looked up whether the shop still existed the other day. I’m really sad to say that it doesn’t.”

It wasn’t an easy childhood, but then a lot of childhoods from that time weren’t. But books were always there, right from the start. Born in Glasgow, on May 30 1939, months before the outbreak of war, Waterstone’s family were your archetypal lower middle class, colonial family. “It wasn’t an easy childhood,” he recalls, “but then a lot of childhoods from that time weren’t. My father was a tea planter and my

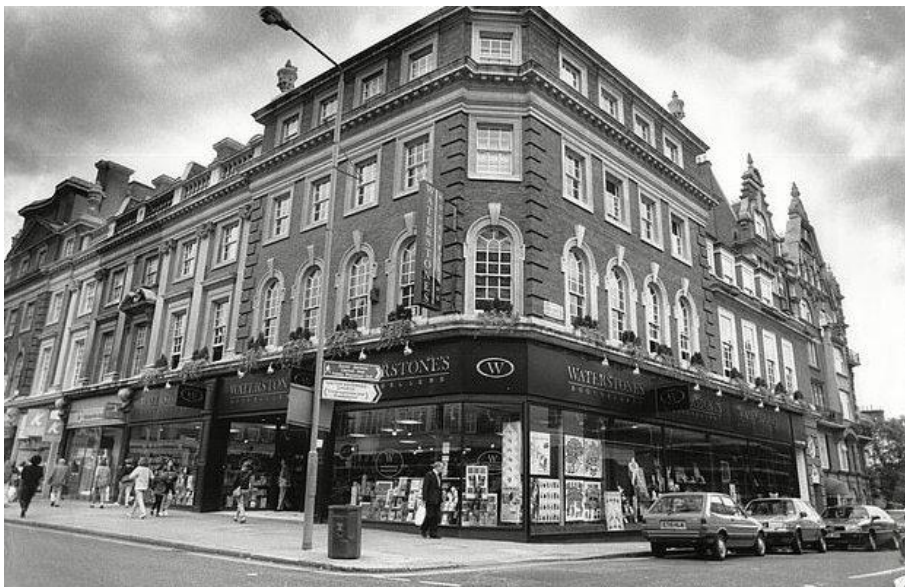
parents were in India for great amounts of time. I vividly remember them telling me when I was six that they'd be back in two-and-a-half years!

And my father had fought in the war, so I had to get to know him when he came back." Books, or at least the three the Waterstone family home held under its roof, were there to absorb his loneliness – and to suggest a life bigger and better.

You never forget your first love, goes the old adage, but rarely does your first love make you your fortune. And yet, after spells working for a broking firm in Calcutta, India, then as marketing manager for the now-gone Allied Breweries, then WHSmith (he was sacked, he was delighted; "They were right to fire me, now I can do what I want to do!"), in 1982, at the age of 42, he emptied his bank account and launched Waterstones with a view to bringing a quality bookshop to every town.

"I wrote a business plan," he remembers, "and I remember saying in it that within 10 years we'd be the biggest booksellers in Europe. It was a ridiculous thing to say, but I knew we could do it. I knew what we were doing was right."

The vision was "big shops, absolutely packed with books, open for hours and hours, seven days a week and staffed with young staff who loved books, who really knew what they were on about." The first store would be at Old Brompton Road in Kensington in West London, which remains to this day.



*One of the early Waterstones bookstores.*

Once he'd reached "five or six stores", with help from his own staff, many of whom invested their own money in their boss's vision, the big investment started to come. "And then it never really stopped," he says. Plenty of people launch businesses on loves and obsessions – there's a nail salon filled with broken dreams in every town in Britain. There must be more to it than just loving books? "Not really," he says. "We just knew what people wanted. When we started the business bookselling had been awful for a long time."

Now 79, his eighth decade looming, Waterstone's breathless love of books is still at the forefront of every utterance today. He describes launching the business as the greatest fun he's ever had. That the success of the chain "improved the cultural

health of the country”. He says: “Bookshops are fantastic places for the community to enjoy.”



*Waterstones bookstore in Piccadilly, London.*

Just last Saturday he popped into Waterstones’ Piccadilly branch in central London. It’s Europe’s largest bookstore, with more than eight miles of shelving spread over six floors. There he sat, in one of the shop’s large comfy armchairs, unannounced, watching the crowds. “I can’t even explain the pleasure I felt watching people browse. But people love what we do. We’re extremely lucky to have such a large share of the market, but we have it because we do what we do really, really well.”

Tangentially, we discuss the state of record shops in 2019. Waterstone reluctantly expresses a view that he believes music retail is “completely doomed”. Fuel for the fire for those who believe HMV’s failing began when its record shops started to feel more like gadget emporiums (the company bought Waterstones in 1998 before eventually selling in 2011; Waterstone was founder chairman of the ill-fated alliance between 1998 and 2001, and says he hated going into branches of the store during this time). The central tenet to his business philosophy remains “Make it good”.

Asked about libraries and their importance to communities and the cultural health of those who live around them, and he tells a story about recently waiting for his daughter in a library in Kilburn, North London. “It was a cracking place, it really was,” he gushes. “Loads of children, librarians working hard, an exuberantly happy place.” He won’t take the easy shot of blaming Tory cuts for their failing. “I want libraries to survive,” he says. “But I want them to be as good as the library I was in when I was in Kilburn.”

He’s worried about the high street, though feels some comfort that landlords are now having to reassess their rents. He’s confident that Waterstones will exist. He’s not so sure about the high street itself. He’s less concerned about Amazon. To an extent, he can see how the two brands complement each other. “We have exactly the same market share now,” he says. “We’re the two dominant brands.

But here's the thing, I believe the nature of book buying, online and in person, are completely different. If you know what you want, you're going to go to Amazon. I do it myself numerous times a year! But we all know online can't replicate the same feelings of pleasure you get in a great bookshop. Our research tells us that well over 70 per cent of purchases at Waterstones were bought on impulse. Even when people had come in to buy a book, they'd left with five more they hadn't intended on buying when they came in."

Waterstone hopes one impulse purchase that might be plucked from the shelves of his empire might be his memoir, released this month, entitled *The Face Pressed Against A Window*. Atlantic Books, £17.99. "I think when you're approaching 80, most of the battles you're going to face in your life are behind you and it's a good time to take stock," he says.

And yet, as well as being an unflinching account of his life from childhood to the present day – taking in a failed marriage, as well as a brief stay in a psychiatric unit – the book also features his first published fiction, in the form of two short stories contained within the book's appendix, since the publication of his fourth novel, *In For a Penny, In For A Pound* in 2010. "Hemingway once said that fiction told more truth than most people's truth," he says, in explanation. "I'm still learning new ways to write, books are still teaching me things even now."

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## 4. Working at Waterstones

*Will Atkinson (below), who worked at Waterstones in the early days, recalls the heady era of the chain's expansion under his former boss, knighted in the Birthday Honours. The article was published on the [www.bookbrunch.co.uk](http://www.bookbrunch.co.uk) website on 11th June 2018 and is archived here with acknowledgement and thanks.*

I worked for Waterstones from 1985 to 1994. Like many of my colleagues I was just out of university, looking for interesting and meaningful work. There were five shops at the time, with Edinburgh on the way. Tim hired everyone at that point, so it was he who interviewed me.



The trade before Waterstones was timid and stuffy. Along with Allen Lane and Peter Mayer, Tim Waterstone was the great disrupter of our industry of the last century, and disrupt we did. We sold books when they came in before publication ("early selling"), opened on Sundays, brought authors in to talk - not just sign - in our shops, ordered, sold and sometimes returned huge quantities of books. We went to every publisher's party we were invited to, crashed some, and tried to sell even more books the next day. We were judged on sales per square foot and quality of stock. We were arrogant, competitive and utterly sure of what we were doing. We were loved by publishers and loathed by the bookselling trade - one delegate from Waterstones was booed at a BA conference when he announced where he was from.

The staff rooms could resemble a senior common room rather than a sanctuary from the shop floor. In our heads we weren't retailers. In my final job, at Hampstead, my team comprised a pop musician who had a gold disc, two theatre actor/producers, a film director, a screenwriter, two composers - and a few professional booksellers.

Tim made all this happen. He provided the sureness of purpose, and backed us to the hilt and beyond. He was always encouraging and rarely critical, believing that we would work out our mistakes given time – and mostly we did. His remorseless drive ensured that we didn't have to worry about the investment going into the company, and ensured more shops, more promotion, more staff, more colleagues, more books sold. If you were any good you were promoted quickly - it was all internal promotion. At a very young age we were given extraordinary responsibility for money, stock and people. Tim gave us 100% and we gave back double.

At the age of 26, I stocked a shop with over a million pounds of stock – no epos, no core stock, just publisher catalogues and a remit to make it the best bookshop in the area. It never happened, but I imagine Tim at Paddington sending me off to go forth and conquer Cheltenham, and of course we did. Three bookshops closed within weeks of our arrival. That's disruption for you.