As a boy, I was a collector, but not, initially, of books. Like my friends, I collected the cards given away in packets of PG Tips tea, sticking them in albums, attempting to put together full sets. I also collected stamps, matchboxes and bus tickets (apparently). I liked to keep the books I read, just as I retained my old comics, but mainly so that I could dip back into them and re-experience the stories. Borrowing from the school library, or the library buried beneath the club rooms in our Sussex village, Horam, was fine, but if I found a really good book I would take it out multiple times for as long as it remained on their shelves (The Master Book of Spies, ‘written and advised’ by Donald McCormick, was a favourite). I could only afford to buy occasional paperbacks from the Scholastic Book Service – usually TV tie-ins like The Tomorrow People and later Blake’s 7. Otherwise, I relied on jumble sales and birthday presents, and books accumulated in the corner of my bedroom along with my comics.

And then I discovered Magpies at the bottom of the high street in our village. At the back of this junk shop, behind the abandoned furniture and unloved ornaments, past rails of musty clothing and boxes of worn but shiny shoes, there were several shelves of tatty books for sale. With my weekly pocket
money of ten pence, and the paperbacks at two pence each, I first found books in Enid Blyton’s *Mystery* and *Adventure* series, then the *Biggles* books of Captain W. E. Johns. My teenage reading became quite wide and indiscriminate as I was tempted by exciting cover art, and I went down some unfortunate avenues (the science fiction of E. C. Tubb was one of many mistakes, along with Westerns). I took risks on Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Martian novels, Samuel Delany’s *Babel-17*, and the low-key thrillers of P. M. Hubbard (*Flush as May*), as well as Mickey Spillane’s hard-boiled detectives.

I also started to read some of my parents’ books, which were unceremoniously kept in a pile at the bottom of a wardrobe in their bedroom. These were popular blockbusters, from Frederick Forsyth’s *The Day of the Jackal* to Alex Haley’s *Roots*, from *Shout at the Devil* by Wilbur Smith to Henri Charrière’s *Papillon*.​
I was never aware that there was a point at which I started to ‘collect’ books. I was certainly a collector once I had discovered John Wyndham, Ian Fleming and the Saint books of Leslie Charteris. Wyndham I loved, buying the 1970s paperback editions with the atmospheric woodcuts by Harry Willock on the covers. I remember being annoyed when I read that Brian Aldiss had disparagingly called Wyndham’s novels ‘cosy catastrophes’, because, as Margaret Atwood later wrote, ‘One might as well call World War Two – of which Wyndham was a veteran – a “cosy” war because not everyone died in it.’ Wyndham is too well known to need my recommendation, but I always consider his books alongside the remarkable The Death of Grass by John Christopher, who ought to be better known. Both authors follow in the tradition of H. G. Wells by writing what should be recognised as a peculiarly British kind of science fiction. There is a certain reticence in the telling, and a focus on an individual’s practical attempts to cope with sensational situations. The story often appears quite understated, but this makes it no less effective.
The lure of the *James Bond* books was obvious — spies, violence and sex, set in various exotic locations around the world. I rather liked the already dated feel of the original books, which seemed to give them authenticity. The *Saint* books were just as exciting, although I was often wrong-footed by just how old-fashioned some of the earliest adventures were — Simon Templar had a tendency to jump on a car’s ‘running-board’ — a term that had to be explained to me by my grandfather.

These thrilling books were all very well, but after plundering the Magpies stock for a few years, I chanced upon Colin Wilson’s literary study, *The Outsider*. I am not sure what first attracted me to the dull-looking Pan paperback, but I think I was looking for direction in my reading. From the inside front cover, I can see that I bought the book in 1981, when I was fourteen years old.
Wilson’s book explores the concept of creative artists who feel alienated from society, using as examples characters from books such as Meursault in Camus’ L’Étranger (The Outsider) and Harry Haller in Hermann Hesse’s Steppenwolf. Wilson defined The Outsider as an individual on the periphery of society, challenging its values, and living by a personal set of rules. The Outsider, for Wilson, was seeking truth amidst the pointlessness of everyday existence. As a teenager I was a willing existentialist, but I am not sure I ever understood whether Wilson believed alienation was a good thing (in that it enabled the observer to see the world more clearly), or something negative (he also highlighted the rare moments of lucidity and understanding that can occasionally cut through the gloom of existence). Positive, negative, or just inevitable, Wilson suggested that alienation made for some of the most vital and interesting literature, and he brought to my attention Sartre,
Camus, Kafka, Hesse, Blake and Dostoyevsky, some of whom could be found in Pan, Penguin and Picador paperbacks in the same junk shop. I bought them up, and now I knew I was collecting books, keeping them arranged in alphabetical order (by author surname) in an alcove of my bedroom.

I began my first ‘wants’ list of authors, which I carried around inside Wilson’s book, which lived in my coat pocket, becoming progressively more dog-eared, as I trawled jumble sales, junk shops, and discovered for the first time the wonderful world of second-hand bookshops.

Wilson also discussed Barbusse, D. H. Lawrence, Nietzsche and Hemingway, all of whom I tried to read but failed to find of any interest. I was convinced I was an existentialist, but what I was really interested in was twentieth-century European literature.

What surprised me, when I talked to anyone who knew anything about books (mainly bookshop owners), was the low esteem in which Wilson was held. And this is still the view of most commentators today. *The Outsider* had originally been published to great acclaim, and the author was considered a prodigy (this was his first book, published when he was in his twenties, written in the British Museum during the day, as he slept rough on park benches at night). Wilson’s essential problem was that he quickly published a vast body of work, and his driven, open and enquiring mind sent him in too many directions, suggesting to his detractors that he gave none of his subjects enough attention. A more reasonable criticism is that he went in various directions that are just too unconventional to be taken seriously (see, for example, his huge *The Occult: A History*, 1971). Does his later work really devalue *The Outsider*? I think not, although I find the book more difficult to read
today. I can see, now, that Wilson was no great prose stylist. Sometimes my mind wanders when I try to reread him. But for anyone starting out, wanting to be challenged to take in a wide variety of thought-provoking literature, the book is still well worth picking up and using as a guide.

* * *

I began going, every other Saturday, to Brighton with my father. He would drop me off at the railway station and continue on to Hove to watch the football. I would walk straight to the Odd Volume bookshop on Upper Gloucester Road, where I clearly remember buying a copy of *The Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs for a school friend, Bibi Lynch (who has since made a living writing about sex, which was not an option discussed in careers lessons). I was asked in the shop if I was really old enough to read the book (when I tried, I didn't understand it). In 1984, Driff described the Odd Volume in his infamous bookshop guide as ‘Sml gen stk Lit & 1sts & leftish’.

I developed a route around Brighton, walking down to the Trafalgar Bookshop, which was rather intimidating, with too many books devoted to sport and multiple leather-bound matching sets. Further down Trafalgar Street was Wax Factor, a much more anarchic shop that sold, as well as books, vinyl records (even more competition for my limited funds). Wax Factor wasn’t a pure bookshop, so Driff refused to include it in his guide.

From there I would work my way along the North Lanes, visiting Two Way Books on Gardner Street (always making at least one purchase from the old couple who ran it), ending up on Duke Street. I occasionally found paperbacks in Holleyman and Treacher, but I have better memories of Colin Page's
bookshop, which was friendlier and with more accessible stock. The real treasures were to be found in the cellar room that was reached by a clanging metal spiral staircase.

If I had time, I would sometimes go along the Old Steine to a shop that was renamed Tall Storeys, but the only books I remember buying there were paperbacks of Kingsley Amis’s *The James Bond Dossier* and Robert Markham’s *Colonel Sun*. (I found out later that Markham was Amis’s pseudonym. I was pleased that Amis hit the right note – when I later read John Gardner’s Bond books, the tone was somehow wrong.)

But no matter what route I took around the town (it was not a city back then), I always ended up at Mr Brookes’s shop at 12 Queen’s Road. (My father would pick me up at a certain time outside the stamp shop a few doors up – he was a collector...
too.) A small, grainy photograph of Mr Brookes can be found in the furthest recesses of the internet, and it shows the man as I remember him: in a jacket and tie, cigarette in hand, looking wistfully past the photographer’s shoulder. His shop was tall and narrow, bursting at the seams, as though passageways had been hacked out from a solid mass of books. On all four floors, the shelves were stacked two or three books deep.

Inevitably, I asked for existentialist European literature and I was directed to the top floor, to shelves on the right-hand side of the window. I have fond memories of sitting in Mr Brookes’s old armchair chatting about books and authors with him while he shared a large bar of Cadbury’s milk chocolate with me. By this time it was usually dark outside and pedestrians and cars would pass slowly outside in the rain. There was a dangerous two-bar electric fire providing warmth. It seemed to be a calm, cultured place, with violin or piano music playing in the background – never anything bombastic and orchestral, and certainly nothing modern.

I don’t know where I heard the rumour that Mr Brookes was ex-MI5 or MI6, and that he had retired on such a good pension that he did not have to make a living out of his business. The story probably came from other booksellers. I was fascinated by the idea of Brookes being a spy – the shabbiness of the man and his shop was reminiscent of down-at-heel characters from John le Carré or Graham Greene novels rather than anything by Ian Fleming or Leslie Charteris. A variant version of the spy rumour was that he was still employed by the security services and was undercover, but this was less convincing. He was believed to have had a knowledge of several Eastern European languages (he was certainly fluent in Polish).