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## The Jimbocho treasuretrove of books from yesteryear

Story & Photos  
By Hal Drake

How did Ring Lardner travel from Long Island to Tokyo?

There it was: *How to Write Short Stories*, one of the brightest works of a long-dimmed literary light—Lardner masterpieces such as *Alibi Ike* and *Champion*, the bitter account of a boxer who is a public idol, worshipped by fans who do not know what a corrupt, rotten-souled bastard he is.

It belongs in a university library or the careful hands of a collector, not collecting dust in a second-hand book store bin.

A first edition; it was even inscribed: "From Mrs. Myron Richards and Margie Richards, July 7th, 1924, to O.F. Rhoades on his 83rd birthday."

If none of them have survived, the book has—even the faded peony pressed between the pages of *My Roomy*, another brilliant Lardner work.

Demeaned to the bargain bin, it might have been a feast for silverfish. But it was retrieved for a few hundred yen by this writer who wouldn't trade it for a new Porsche or an old Bugatti.

This happened in the ruck and disorder of the Jimbocho, the bustling literary bargain counter that sprawls over long blocks in the Kanda district of northeastern Tokyo.

It is full of beyond-count bookshops, each indistinguishable from the other, all with the same sliding-glass doors and flyspecked windows, every one with the same carelessly heaped commodity. Books. Hundreds of thousands of books, in every language, on all subjects.

To be sure, there are fewer shops than in former days, because many have ceded valuable

ground to banks and boutiques. But there are still rare and bountiful finds for the alert and watchful.

In one nondescript shop were bound volumes of the *Weekly London Times*, a complete set for 1916, which told of the Easter Rebellion in Dublin and the ghastly Battle of the Somme. The shopper who bought those pushed something else aside—a 1901 weekly magazine that told of President William McKinley's planned appearance at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, N.Y. That night, the shopper recalled a history lesson. McKinley did show up and was fatally shot by an anarchist who became one of the first victims of a device called the electric chair. The shopper dashed back for the magazine. It was gone.

The Dante sells the kind of castoff magazines once left on back porches for the *Good Will—Life* magazines dating back to 1937, early *Playboy*, vintage *Spiderman*. On Jan. 1, 1951, *Time's* Man of the Year was the American soldier, the grim and grimy rifleman who stood against the Red onrush in Korea. It would be an antique to many Americans, telling of a time it wasn't fashionable to flee to Canada. Does anybody on this long boulevard know Thomas Mann from Erskine Caldwell? You have to wonder as you see *Josef und Seine Bruder* nestling with *Tobacco Road*. Few shopkeepers appreciate literary values or know what they have on their hands.

Bargains begin to abound at 10 a.m. when bookshops raise their shutters and outdoor stalls are wheeled to the sidewalks—pushed by mom-and-pop proprietors or a single owner-clerk.

A whole set of *Encyclopedia Britannica* for \$40? Well, it is a bit outdated. Identifying Korea

as the colonial property of Japan. The chapter on makeup was written by Lon Chaney, the silent-screen master of horrific disguise.

Some stores can take weight off a shopper's wallet. The *Isseido*, 90 years old, is full of knowledgeable dealers who catalogue their goods and offer no markdown or stocktake. That 1882 edition of *Nana* went right from Emile Zola's pen to a press in Paris. This was before Zola faced inquisitors at the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, but he was already a natural enemy of officials scandalized by that engraving of his courtesan, clad only in a diaphanous nightgown as she disports herself by candlelight. Has it been there, never sold, since the *Isseido* welcomed its first customers in 1907? Shaking his head, a young clerk can only quote a stayaway price: \$500 U.S. Perhaps some wealthy collector will finally take it away.

It wouldn't be missed for long. *Nana's* niche would be easily filled by another work because the Jimbocho has never suffered stock shortages. Many books are castoffs from libraries. There are three universities within a walk and others close by. And generations of departing foreign residents, finding disused books to be troublesome luggage, brought them to the Jimbocho.

There might be many more treasures, indifferently thrown on disorderly piles. But is there no alphabetical order, no Dewey Decimal System, no bank of computers to trace book or author to guide bewildered browsers?

And must there always be that slagheap of books at every door, no exceptions to all this colorful chaos?

Well, there's the Haga Bookstore, which keeps its goods discreetly indoors has a dignified facade of black tile and an automatic door banked by potted evergreen.

It sells porno.

