

an explosively funny novel about life in a great department store

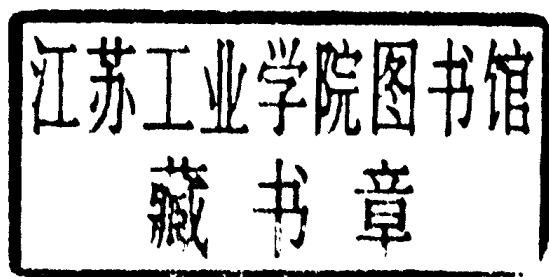


everything
and more

G e o f f N i c h o l s o n

Everything and More

GEOFF NICHOLSON



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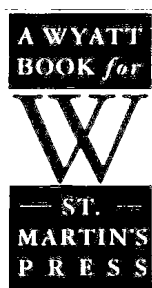
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By the same author:

Fiction

STREET SLEEPER

STILL LIFE WITH VOLKSWAGENS

THE KNOT GARDEN

WHAT WE DID ON OUR HOLIDAYS

HUNTERS AND GATHERERS

THE FOOD CHAIN

THE ERROL FLYNN NOVEL

Non-fiction

BIG NOISES

DAY TRIPS TO THE DESERT

Fiction provided me with many valuable ideas
and some very real incentives to success.

H. GORDON SELFRIDGE

1 • THE GRAND OPENING

The store rests in darkness, waiting for opening time, for the human presence. The escalators are still, the air-conditioning is silent. The carpets are vacuumed and ready for business. It is all here. The preparations are complete. The merchandise is all laid out for you; of good quality, eye-catchingly displayed, attractively packaged.

The shelves and hangers and rails and spinners are heavy with goods. Each floor, each department, each aisle and counter is well stocked and arranged to offer up its best; from pocket calculators to bridal wear, from the tartan shop to the heel bar, from pets' accessories to the mother and baby room, it is all in order, accessible and schematized. The staff have worked hard. The systems are in place; systems of accounting and stock control, of safety and security, of supply and demand.

It is all for you. We are here to serve. We assure you of our best attentions. We thank you for your continuing support in these difficult times. You are our favoured customer. You are always right.

Don't be afraid to touch. Feel the quality, feel the breadth. Feel free to browse. Take an unhurried wander through each and every department, turn it into an occasion, make a whole day of it. Wallow in the luxury. Breathe in the balmy air of the perfumery and the enticing smells from the bakery and the Mr Cappuccino Coffee Shop. Throw away your cares. Let yourself be pampered. Spoil yourself, live a little. Live a lot.

Arnold Haden, the only surviving Haden brother, reclines in the austere whiteness of his penthouse at the top of the department store that bears his name. He is a large, soft man, weak but not frail, youthful though not young.

He says, 'It's the old story. The lunatic sets up his easel and decides to paint the whole world and everything in it.

'He works diligently and makes good progress until the moment he

realizes that in order to complete his task, the painting will need to contain a self-portrait of himself painting the whole world and everything in it.

'Not only that. He will then need to paint himself painting himself painting himself and so on. I believe this is known as a regress, and it might well drive him mad if he weren't mad already.'

'And it's very much the same with a department store like Haden Brothers. We like to say that the store contains everything and more; that's our slogan, our sales pitch. If you want a pin, an elephant, a Ron Arad Big easy chair, an Aldo Rossi La Conica stainless-steel coffee maker, we've got it. But can you come here and buy a department store in which you can buy everything and more? Well, we do have a real estate department, but no, not really. And can you come here and buy a department store in which you can buy a department store in which you can buy a department store in which . . . ? And so on. Another regress.

'At Haden Brothers we have not quite reached that state of philosophical purity, nor have we yet been driven mad, but I will say this for us: Haden Brothers is everything that is the case.'

The call comes via Arnold Haden's secretary, and the message is that Miss Vita Carlisle would at long last like to see him in private. She has come to a decision and she suggests that the meeting take place in his penthouse at seven o'clock that evening, after the store has shut.

For Arnold it's almost too good to be true. At first he thinks his secretary may have got the message wrong, though normally she is absolutely efficient. It's just that he can't quite believe it. He's waited so long. Then he wonders if it's a tease, a delaying tactic to be followed by more frustration and more rejection. And yet he suspects not. To date that hasn't been Vita Carlisle's style. She doesn't seem to be given to acts of deliberate cruelty, but he has nevertheless been hurt by her indifference. So perhaps his campaign has finally succeeded. She has succumbed, she is ready to submit; or at least she will be at seven this evening. His persuasiveness, his pleas, and certainly his patience have finally paid off. Nevertheless he needs some confirmation and so makes an internal phone call to the department where he knows she's working.

She answers the phone and says, 'Furnishing fabrics.'

'Miss Carlisle?'

Of course she recognizes the voice at once but she doesn't reply.

'Vita?'

'Yes, Mr Haden.'

'I got your message, Vita. Does it mean what I think it means?'

'Please, Mr Haden, I'm in the middle of a crowded shop floor.'

'I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't ring you at-work, even if it's my work too. It's just that if it does mean what I think it means, then I can't tell you how happy I am.'

'Can you not?'

'Well yes, I can if you'll give me a chance.'

'Perhaps you'll tell me later.'

'At seven, yes certainly, if you like, but really, why wait so long, why not come up right now?'

'I'm afraid I do have customers waiting.'

'Of course you do. It's very conscientious of you, it's just that, I was wondering . . .'

'I'll be happy to deal with all that for you later,' she says, and he detects a sudden coldness.

'What is it? Can you not speak? Is the buyer standing next to you? Don't worry about her.'

'Yes, seven o'clock. Thank you for calling Haden Brothers.'

She doesn't exactly hang up on him but suddenly the line is dead and she's moved on swiftly and efficiently to her next customer. Arnold Haden's mind throws up intriguing pictures of her at work in the furnishing fabrics department, being attentive and efficient, gently coercive, making a lot of sales. Then the pictures become distorted and fantastical. As though in a dream sequence he sees her naked, yet still going about her duties in the department, operating the till, showing swatches of cloth to customers who are completely oblivious to her nakedness, immune to the white perfection of her body. He is not so immune.

The rest of his day is spent in a barely controlled frenzy of anticipation. He remains in a state of adolescent nervousness and arousal that nothing can quell. As the afternoon wears on, he showers more than once, has a manicurist and hairdresser sent up from the store to make sure he's trim and presentable. He selects his newest, cleanest, whitest clothes, ensures that his stocks of chilled white wine and champagne are more than adequate, has maids come in to Hoover his white carpets, put fresh white lilies in the vases, put crisp white sheets on his bed. He is not naive enough to believe that Vita Carlisle is a virgin, and yet he feels there will be much about this meeting, this

event, that will be fresh and virginal. He sends his secretary home early. His staff are told he is incommunicado. The phones are muted. Nothing is going to be allowed to intrude on his pleasure with Vita.

A little before the appointed hour he hears the whirr of his private lift. The commissionaire at ground level has been told to admit nobody except Vita Carlisle, so it can only be her. He waits in the plain, sparse ante-room into which the lift opens. He positions himself by one of the panoramic windows and adopts a pose that he hopes looks nonchalant and unstudied. The suspense is killing.

The lift arrives, its doors open and suddenly she's there with him. Although her every feature and repertoire of gestures is imprinted on his memory, there is still something fresh and surprising about her. She is no longer in her work clothes, but is wearing a long, pale, loose cotton dress, summery and chaste; not that it has a chastening effect on Arnold Haden.

'Hello, Vita,' he says.

'Hello, Mr Haden. Arnold.'

'Thank you for that,' he says. 'I think it's time we were on first name terms.'

She makes no reply. She looks serene and self-possessed. Arnold Haden's instinct is to make a spirited if clumsy lunge at her, to ravish her on the threshold of the lift, but he knows she wouldn't appreciate that. She is a sophisticated young woman, she must be granted her own time and her own space. He remains stuck in his pose and doesn't move as she crosses the room, not approaching him but heading instead for one of the windows, where she stands some ten feet away from him and looks down to the street below, at the people, the taxis and the parked cars.

She taps on the window with the knuckle of her right hand. 'Armoured glass?' she enquires.

He finds it a surprising question but nods in confirmation.

'I suppose you feel secure up here,' she says.

At this moment he feels insecure to the point of dementia. The muscles in the rear of his knees have developed a neurotic, twitching life of their own, but he admits that being here gives him a much needed sense of safety and detachment.

'Even if a bomb went off in the street you'd be safe up here, wouldn't you? You might feel a shock wave, a painting or two might fall off the wall . . .'

'There are no paintings on my walls,' he says hastily.

'But nothing could touch you, could it?'

'I wouldn't say nothing. That is, I wouldn't want to put it to the test, but yes, the general idea is that I should be safe.'

'I don't blame you at all,' she says sweetly.

He's pleased that she understands, seems to care about his safety. So many people consider his isolation to be a rich recluse's eccentricity.

'So terrorists hold no fears for you?' she continues.

'I wouldn't say *no* fears.'

'But why? I mean look at those cars down there, say the blue Ford Escort, the red Hillman Imp, the white Renault; even if every one of those cars was packed with explosives, and even if the police weren't given a tip off, and even if they exploded, and even if there were bombs in the store itself, say incendiary devices, smoke bombs and nail bombs, and even if the whole lot went off, well, you'd be all right, wouldn't you, Arnold? You might lose a few customers, a few members of staff, a certain amount of stock, but you'd be fine, it wouldn't make any difference to you, would it?'

Arnold Haden is finding this conversation unnecessary and anything but erotic, nevertheless he doesn't want to ignore her apparently real concern.

'I care very much indeed about our customers and staff,' he says. 'And I'd hate to lose any stock.'

'Come on, Arnold, stop sounding like the staff manual.'

He smiles, enjoying her sudden playfulness. He takes her garrulousness as proof that she is every bit as nervous and apprehensive as he. He doesn't mind that at all, yet he decides it's time to take the initiative. He moves towards her but she has her back to him and doesn't turn round, just continues to look out of the window. He puts his hands on her neck and although she doesn't resist, neither does she react. That doesn't please him. He'd like her to thrill at his touch. He wants her to submit, but he doesn't want her to be inert.

'I've been waiting a long time for this,' he says.

'I know. Me too.'

'But I think it was probably worth it; the pleasures of delayed gratification and so on.'

'I think I know what you mean.'

'I realize I have no right to ask this, Vita, but tell me, what made you change your mind?'

He begins very gently to massage the nape of her neck and he

convinces himself that there is a dim ripple of pleasure in her body.

'I mean, was it simply my persistence? Or a sudden realization? Or did something happen in your own life?'

'All the above,' she says, offhandedly, and he takes it as an evasion, a reluctance to answer.

'Not that it matters now you're here,' he says to let her off the hook.

He moves very close, presses his body against her back. Her buttocks fit into his pelvis, her head rests against his shoulder and her blonde hair presents itself to his face. He inhales deeply. His hands snake around her, make straight for her breasts. He holds them just for a moment, clenches them, realizes he's rushing things, pressing too hard, releases them, and yet he can't stint himself; his hands descend down her ribs, to her waist and then to her belly, and that's where things start to feel very wrong.

There is something strange under the loose cotton of the dress, a lot of webbing and strapping. He thinks at first it might be some kind of corset or item of structural erotic underwear. That would be very thoughtful of her, although in fact it would not suit his particular tastes, and yet his instincts tell him he is not touching anything as simple as underwear, and as his hands continue their descent they encounter something hard and cylindrical, something that at first feels distinctly phallic. 'Oh my God, don't tell me I've been trying all this time to seduce a transvestite or a transsexual.' But there's nothing fleshy or sexual about this cylinder and he can feel there are several of the damn things located in a row across her abdomen. He takes his hands off her and steps back.

She turns towards him. The dress still hangs too loosely to tell him what's beneath, but obligingly she reaches down and grips the hem, slowly, tantalizingly lifting the skirt above her knees, then above her thighs, then to her waist to reveal a form of undergarment he has never seen before, a form that is not a real undergarment at all.

The hard cylinders are, in fact, three sticks of dynamite, held in place by tape and belts, with detonators and a tangle of electrical wiring that leads to a switch located by her navel. He wonders if he's misread Vita Carlisle completely, that she isn't some fresh young thing and that she's offering him a part in some bizarre and arcane sexual game, a piece of perverse role playing that he would never have expected from her. Yet in his heart of hearts he knows this is not the case. This isn't simply about sex.

She says, 'There's enough explosive here to blow us both to smithereens.'

He doesn't doubt it. 'Do you *want* to blow us both to smithereens?' he asks.

She considers this for a moment. 'I don't know yet,' she says. 'But it's definitely an option, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is,' he admits.

'If you attempt to call security or make a dash for it, or try to overpower me, then I'll do it without a moment's hesitation.'

'I wouldn't dream of doing any of those things.'

'That's very sensible of you,' she says.

'Are there any other options?' he asks gently.

'What?'

'I mean is it possible that you *won't* blow us both to smithereens?'

It's a genuine enquiry, a request for information.

'I suppose so,' she says, but she sounds neither convinced nor convincing.

'Is there something you want from me?' Arnold Haden asks. 'Money maybe?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Or is there something more specific you need, some service, something I can do for you?'

'I'm not sure. Possibly. I'll have to think about it.'

Arnold Haden looks at her with an expression that he hopes conveys concern.

'Take all the thinking time you need,' he says, and he doesn't sound pleading. It doesn't sound like a delaying tactic. He genuinely doesn't want Vita to be rushed.

'I must say, Arnold, you're taking this terribly well,' she says sarcastically.

'I am, aren't I?'

'How come?'

'Because I've been expecting this, Vita. I've been expecting it all my life.'

ARNOLD HADEN: Yes, it's true that I liked to have sex with pretty young women. The fact that some of them, most of them, tended to be Haden Brothers employees is not so very surprising. Haden Brothers is my world. It's where I have my being. I didn't go out much in those days. I wasn't a very socially adept person, I admit it. It's not a crime.

And if you were to say that these sexual encounters were not particularly meaningful or spiritual or uplifting, well, I would probably have to agree with you. But equally I would say that they were harmless and not particularly exploitative. I told the young women exactly what I wanted, and I didn't want anything so terrible. I wanted sex. I didn't make any sort of pretence. I never pretended I was in love with the girls. I didn't promise to marry them or say I could advance their careers at Haden Brothers. I was very straightforward with them. That's how I always try to do business.

And yes, I know it could be said that my tastes were a little humdrum, a little predictable. I liked the girls to be young, innocent, fresh, blonde, unsullied, clean; I was always very particular about cleanliness. I went for the natural look, unadorned, and certainly Vita Carlisle fitted the bill, the pattern, was almost a Platonic model, an ideal of the kind of young woman I like. But it wasn't that simple.

On the surface it might look like Vita Carlisle was just another of Mr Haden's girls, and at first that's all I wanted her to be, but as time went by, the longer she resisted, she became, in my own mind if nowhere else, something quite different; something special and unique and really rather wonderful. Not to put too fine a point on it, and not wanting to sound too pathetic, I fell in love with her.

VITA CARLISLE: As a person he disgusted me, obviously. How could he not, a man of his age, not very attractive, not in very good shape, not witty or charming or intelligent, despite his own high opinion of himself. I thought Mr Arnold Haden was a very inadequate human being, and I can see why he would have problems forming mature relationships with women.

In theory I don't see prostitution as a particularly pernicious form of human interaction. At least its rules are clear. A medium of exchange is established; the power relations, at least for the time of the transaction, are clear cut. If Arnold Haden had simply hired a string of call girls I would have had some sympathy, and considerably more respect for him. What disgusted me was that he chose to involve some of his female employees (invariably the younger, more vulnerable, less experienced ones) in a set of relations where the medium of exchange was distorted to his infinite advantage. Perhaps some of the girls would say that they were happy enough to have sex with him, perhaps they got something out of it that they needed, but that isn't to say they weren't exploited. How could they be equal

partners in a transaction where the power relations were so monstrously unequal?

I thought Arnold Haden was a user and an abuser. He was, among other things, corrupt, sick and dangerous. But actually, that had nothing at all to do with why I went to his little white penthouse at the top of his store and threatened to blow him to smithereens.

CHARLIE MAYHEW: The quest for meaning is, arguably, the quest for structure. Novelists, in particular, often feel the need for a rigid, supportive, guiding framework in their books. This may be mythological and/or ironic and/or arbitrary. So James Joyce has the *Odyssey*. Primo Levi has the Periodic Table. Georges Perec has his Parisian apartment building. And so on. Some of these structures seem a lot more supportive than others.

So I thought to myself, why not structure a book like a department store? There would be ease of access, fancy window dressing, a bargain basement, loss leaders, information points, knobs and knockers, free tastings, gift wrapping, puzzles and games, a grotto at Christmas, everything clearly signposted and lots of fire escapes and emergency exits.

But more than that, a department store is a great depository of stuff. It's a world of objects. Perhaps not all human life is there but there's not much lacking in the way of desirable consumer items. And the store divides up this world of objects in ways that are essentially arbitrary, into floors and departments and sub-departments, and occasionally into franchises or stores within the store, so that each area contains its own categories of experience and knowledge, its own slice of the world. This is, arguably, a fairly serviceable structure. This is, arguably, what all art does.

And of course there are people in the store; the more or less fixed population of staff and the more or less fluid population of shoppers. They exist within the structure. They animate it but they are also subservient to it. Structures are controlling mechanisms for people as well as for works of art.

At the centre of my imagined book there would be a pun which might seem highly significant or rather lame depending on your attitude. The pun would be on the word 'retailing', which suggests both the selling of goods and the telling of tales. An author is indeed a seller of goods, and a department store is indeed a place full of stories, even fictions.

If one were not careful this could all too easily turn into some kind of sub-Chaucerian compendium featuring the bought-ledger clerk's tale, the stationery sales assistant's tale, the wife of the customer in the delicatessen department's tale, and so, boringly, on. This would be a structure but not an appealing one.

It is clear that stories are important to us, and can in themselves be a form of structure, but they aren't the only thing that's important. Significance may lie in a graffito, in a colour scheme, in an arrangement of tableware, in the purchase of a new flip-top bin. Light fading through shop windows, the angle of a spotlight, the shape of some point-of-sale packaging; all these things contain meanings but they are not stories. We need a structure that can contain these too.

The book would contain a linked but smaller and more localized pun on the verb 'to shop', which can mean to buy goods, or in slang terms, to betray, to turn someone in to the authorities. (Of course, one may do this by 'telling tales'.) I'm not sure that this second meaning would make sense in American or Australian or South African English, to say nothing of the translations.

But structure is never wholly arbitrary, and it is always allied to function. The structure of a department store draws in the customer, allows a wide range of goods and services to be stocked, displayed and sold. It keeps both staff and customers under control. And if this is done with some efficiency the store may shift a lot of units and show a profit.

At best, the structure of a novel draws in the reader, allows a wide range of themes and ideas to be stocked, displayed and, in some sense, sold. It keeps both the author and his subject matter under control. And if this is done with some efficiency he may shift a lot of units and show a profit. If he's really lucky his novel may even be on sale in department stores.

It sounded like a great idea to me, but it took me a long time to realize what was possible, and by then it was far too late.

I never wanted to work at Haden Brothers at all. I thought it far too snobby, far too grand. I would have said it was full of overpriced, useless rubbish. I thought the staff were probably all morons and the customers even worse. Until I went to work there I wouldn't have been seen dead there, but you know how it is, paupers can't be choosers. I wouldn't have worked at all if I could have helped it. It sounds silly, but I wanted to be an artist!

I said this to Vita Carlisle the first time I met her. And strange as it