

Insight: Every dealer's nightmare – a flooded bookstore

by Bon Summers, Ancient City Booksellers, USA

Imagine – you live in an area where no flooding has taken place for 38 years and your stock is held in a professional storage area surrounded by some 200 other units. Sounds a good bet? . . . Read on. Here is one dealer's first-hand experience. Bon Summers was hit by a flash flood and it took her 20 day's solid hard work in temperatures exceeding 90°F with high humidity to recover the remaining stock. This is her account.

What does a bookseller do to prepare for the possibility of a flood in their store? The first thing is to prepare **before it starts raining!**

This event happened to me recently, in July 2015. I live in the State of Florida, USA. Florida is a state where you find tropical weather nine months of the year, often in the summer it rains for five minutes a day but torrential rains can catch you with your book jackets off. So within a 3-4 day continuous rainfall I experienced a one inch slosh.

Two of our states, Texas and Tennessee this year witnessed flooded areas that had not rained in 100 and 500 years, rain yes, floods no. It destroyed thousands of homes and caused deaths. Plus the bookstores in its paths probably lost their whole inventory if stored in areas where water could have come in rapidly. Water in those areas were from 4 feet to 20 feet and within the river banks and houses or stores experienced up to 4 feet inside and up the walls and into the books. You can hardly elevate a whole bookstore of books!



A selection of damaged cartons and the new shelving

Preparation is the key, of course, before it can do damage and the first thing is obvious – do not store any books in an area near water. Water can creep up like little fingers in a fog, it can leave a green mould you see on leather, or a wet moisture build up that destroys books and paper products. There is no relief for a wet painting or print.

Areas where flood insurance is not needed does not always relieve this situation because both those states were considered non-floodable areas but no one told the rising water!

In a metaphysical statement used millions of times . . . 'you cannot push the river' - it goes exactly where it wants to go. It can eat into a field of corn in a heart beat and it can destroy 100 boxes of books within minutes.

I chose a proper commercial storage unit in the midst of some 200 others individual units in the same area. There had NOT been a flood on their properties for 38 years and floods were never uppermost in my mind. But the event happened and so I wish to share my story, with photos, to my colleagues.

I have always tried to protect all my books when packing them away for future entry into inventory. Un-listed books are first put in a clear plastic gallon bag. This helps to secure the dust jacket and keep it as tight as can be, no chips. Some booksellers frown on this practice. If the books are to be left for some days the practice is ideal in the Florida climate.

Then they are stacked spine to front, so by laying them flat (always lay your books flat whenever they will be sitting for a few weeks or months), and before you put them in any cardboard box first line the inside with a simple large trash bag, (3 mm if possible) then fold it over and close the lid.

This gives the box a head start of being water free, critter-free, or silver fish free. Deodorized plastic bags are now the rage. Whenever possible use comic book boxes which are just the correct size for two layers of hardcover books. If you know a bookstore that sells comics, make your contact. They are wonderful heavier cardboard boxes and not only have the usual lids but handles to help you lift the weight.

So now let us game-play! We now have 200 boxes of books to store in a dry storage unit, please lay a one or two inch wooden board down if you cannot elevate that first shelf enough to give an air pocket (or a rain pocket) to breathe in. I use long 8' to 10' pine boards, about 10 or 12 inches wide. This certainly gives peace of mind. Also, do not forget red bricks. I love bricks, place a 1 inch thick board over them, every 3 feet or so and wham . . . secure.

Perhaps someone not in this business would consider these steps unnecessary but we all know that time gets away from us, as booksellers, and weeks become months and soon a year has passed because you found another 2,000 books to buy.

The images above should give you an idea of what water can do - even on a very small scale. This was the effect from just 1 inch of flooding!

Given this reminder – that even a small one inch flood can quickly soak into a carton – and in no time the effect spreads rapidly. I would suggest that every dealer, who has books stored in an area where it is thought to be free of floods, to think again and plan ahead.

On reflection, I only lost 1,000 books out of 10,000 stored in that unit only because I visited that storage unit daily, I was extremely lucky and caught it before the water peaked.

If any of these ideas can be done ahead of time to prepare for such an event, then this little testimonial might save a few books . . . and a few nightmares!

Good luck friends.

Bon Summers

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