

Great Books

During the second summer of college, after summer school, I tried my hand at selling *Great Books of the Western World* sold by Encyclopedia Britannica. This was a 54 volume set of extravagantly bound and gilled page books that would make any book case or library self look gorgeous. The books were in every school and public library and were truly a fantastic adjunct to anyones education. The problem was that the people who sold this wonderful compendium of knowledge, handed down over the past four thousand years or so, were the worst con men and probably should have been arrested.

The guy that took me under his wing for the first month was about 45 years old. He had light brown hair with blond highlights, back in the days when no one highlighted their hair unless you were a movie star. The hair was cut just a little shaggy with a straight cut in back rather than tapered. His face was just a little too flabby, light brown eye brows, a somewhat down turned mouth with a fuzzy light brown neatly trimmed mustache. If he had curled it up at the ends he would have made the perfect bad guy in those old silent movies where the heroin was strapped to a log that was heading towards the enormous saw blade – “Come back next week for the startling conclusion.” Randy said he made almost \$400 a month which was pretty good for two days a week. Hell my dad was only making \$600 a month and he was an engineer. Mr. Con Man lived by the beach with his *friend* and a big female dog that licked both of them in the most disturbing way. After a month with *Randy*, I can not recall his real name but Randy kind of sums him up, I was sure those two were more than friends and the dog was more than a pet.

Randy and I would cover the area west of El Segundo, which was not the best of neighborhoods but was close to the ocean and had some appeal to guys who where *temporary out of work* and whose wives (or girl friends) had a eight to four job bringing home just barely enough to pay for the rent and beer for the man of the house. We would get leads via the post cards that where in every magazine. The guy in a moment of weakness would look at the beautiful leather covered books and think to himself, “If I get these I will turn my life around, get my GED, go to college and really become someone.”

Then he would fill in the perforated tear out postcard and send it in. These leads were much better than cold calling at someones door. We would make a list of six or seven leads all in the same neighborhood, drive to the location, park Randy's car and with our burden of three books, paperwork for a loan and a bunch of fliers to leave, we hit the street. Randy, I must stay had his patter down pat and seldom walked away without a signature on the loan papers for the almost \$800 dollar commitment for which some poor schmuck signed up. When his girlfriend or wife got home she would cry and point out that she did not make that kind of money but he would counter, "Look dear I am going to turn my life around and get my GED and go to school. I'll be someone." Sure you would if you could only read.

Randy got a commission for every sale or loan document that went through, and Randy made pretty good money, so after my month with Randy I was on my own. I would receive an envelope in the mail with about 15 leads and I would plan my Friday and Saturday night. Knock, knock, knock. "Hi am I speaking to Mr. Davies? You sent in this card. I am in your neighborhood this evening and I have brought you these, *The Great Books*." and then I would show him those beautiful books. Sometime the guy would invite me in and I would get right to work. "I see you have kids. How old are they?". He would look around at the clutter in the room and say, "Well Sally is 11 and Bobby is nine. Do you think they could read these?" "Definitely, this series is designed for younger folk and has an index and a separate book with study guides and summaries of all the books written especially for young readers." The guy would stare at the books and I would show him a brochure with the books in a very attractive book case, which we also sold.

I think because I was so young and because the wife would show up a lot of times I really did not make enough to warrant wasting my Friday and Saturday night. I tried for two months and only sole three sets. I always looked like I was ashamed of what I was doing and I think even these customers could sense my relief when they ushered me out the door with a, "I'll think about it." or "I have to run this by my wife." I just was not as good a con man as Randy, and I hoped I never would be.