In this fictional account, a biographer named Margaret talks about her father's bookstore.

Margaret’s Story
by Dianne Setterfield

Rising from the stairs, I stepped into the darkness of the shop. I didn't need the light switch to find my way. I know the shop the way you know the places of your childhood. Instantly the smell of leather and old paper was soothing. I ran my fingertips along the spines, like a pianist along his keyboard. Each book has its own individual note: the grainy, linen-covered spine of Daniel's History of Map Making, the cracked leather of Lakunin's minutes from the meetings of the St. Petersburg Cartographic Academy; a well-worn folder that contains his maps, hand-drawn, hand-colored. You could blindfold me and position me anywhere on the three floors of this shop, and I could tell you from the books under my fingertips where I was.

We see few customers in Lea’s Antiquarian Booksellers, a scant half-dozen a day on average. There is a flurry of activity in September when the students come to buy copies of the new year’s set texts; another in May when they bring them back after the exams. These books my father calls migratory. At other times of the year we can go days without seeing a client. Every summer brings the odd tourist who, having wandered off the beaten track, is prompted by curiosity to step out of the sunshine and into the shop, where he pauses for an instant, blinking as his eyes adjust. Depending on how weary he is of eating ice cream and watching the punts on the river, he might stay for a bit of shade and tranquillity or he might not. More commonly visitors to the shop are people who, having heard about us from a friend of a friend, and finding themselves near Cambridge, have made a special detour. They have anticipation on their faces as they step into the shop, and not infrequently apologize for disturbing us. They are nice people, as quiet and as amiable as the books themselves. But mostly it is just Father, me and the books.

How do they make ends meet? you might think, if you saw how few customers come and go. But you see, the shop is, in financial terms, just a sideline. The proper business takes place elsewhere. We make our living on the basis of perhaps half a dozen transactions a year. This is how it works: Father knows all the world’s great collectors, and he knows the world’s great collections. If you were to watch him at the auctions or book fairs that he attends frequently, you would notice how often he is approached by quietly

1 punts: a type of boat
spoken, quietly dressed individuals, who draw him aside for a quiet word. Their eyes are anything but quiet. Does he know of . . . they ask him, and Has he ever heard whether . . . A book will be mentioned. Father answers vaguely. It doesn't do to build up hope. These things usually lead nowhere. But on the other hand, if he were to hear anything . . . And if he doesn't already have it, he makes a note of the person's address in a little green notebook. Then nothing happens for quite some time. But later—a few months or many months, there is no knowing—at another auction or book fair, seeing a certain other person, he will inquire, very tentatively, whether . . . and again the book is mentioned. More often than not, it ends there. But sometimes, following the conversations, there may be an exchange of letters. Father spends a great deal of time composing letters. In French, German, Italian, even occasionally Latin. Nine times out of ten the answer is a courteous two-line refusal. But sometimes—half a dozen times a year—the reply is the prelude to a journey. A journey in which Father collects a book here, and delivers it there. He is rarely gone for more than forty-eight hours. Six times a year. This is our livelihood.

The shop itself makes next to no money. It is a place to write and receive letters. A place to while away the hours waiting for the next international bookfair. In the opinion of our bank manager, it is an indulgence, one that my father's success entitles him to. Yet in reality—my father's reality and mine; I don't pretend reality is the same for everyone—the shop is the very heart of the affair. It is a repository of books, a place of safety for all the volumes, once so lovingly written, that at present no one seems to want.

And it is a place to read.

A is for Austen, B is for Brontë, C is for Charles and D is for Dickens. I learned my alphabet in this shop. My father walking along the shelves, me in his arms, explaining alphabetization at the same time as he taught me to spell. I learned to write there, too: copying out names and titles onto index cards that are still there in our filing box, thirty years later. The shop was both my home and my job. It was a better school for me than school ever was, and afterward it was my own private university. It was my life.

My father never put a book into my hands and never forbade a book. Instead, he let me roam and graze, making my own more and less appropriate selections. I read gory tales of historic heroism that nineteenth-century parents thought were suitable for children, and gothic ghost stories that were surely not; I read accounts of arduous travel through treacherous lands undertaken by spinsters in crinolines, and I read handbooks on decorum and etiquette intended for young ladies of good family; I read books with pictures and books without; books in English, books in French, books in languages I didn't understand, where I could make up stories in my head on the basis of a handful of guessed-at words. Books. Books. And books.