

Trek to "The Book Thing"

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When listening to [The ColdFusion Weekly](#) podcast, I heard [Peter Farrell](#) describe "The Book Thing" in Baltimore. It was, according to his description, a place that had shelves and shelves of free books - whole rooms of them in fact.

As a book lover, this place sounded like Xanadu. When I got the opportunity to go with my wife to Baltimore (from where I am working right now), I knew that I couldn't pass up the chance to visit "The Book Thing".

I found the web site and looked up the address and hours - open 9-6 on Saturday and Sunday. We had other plans on Saturday, so Sunday was our day. Address in hand, we flagged down a cab in front of the hotel. I told the driver the address, but he didn't know it.

So, back to the hotel we go. This time, I wrote down directions (no printer while I travel) and the nearest major intersection. Back at the street, we found another taxi.

I asked this driver if he knew the address. He didn't either. So, I asked him if he knows the way to 25th and Greenmount. He said that he did, so we got in the cab.

My wife reminded me that I had earlier told her the intersection was 33rd and Greenmount, so I relayed this to the driver. He laughed a bit at this. I figured that he was laughing at a man being corrected about the address by his wife, so I smiled and we were off. In retrospect, this was our first real clue of what was to come.

Neither of us knew what kind of neighborhood "The Book Thing" was in, so we watched out the window for clues. We drove through some rather downtrodden neighborhoods, but then went through some refurbished ones, so we were pretty optimistic. Until, however, we turned into the neighborhood around 33rd and Greenmount.

The cabbie asked us if we want to stop before the light or after. We told him just to stop at the gas station before the light. I asked him for the number to the cab company so that I could call for a return ride. He asked how long we were going to be (our second clue). We told him that we would be a while, so he gave us a card with the number.

When we got out of the cab, we got our first good look at the neighborhood in which we had placed ourselves. I'll be the first to admit that at this stage of my life, I have become rather bourgeois. This neighborhood isn't. To call it "working class" would be generous.

We walked past several small store fronts - churches and "adult" stores clustered together with laundromats and other small stores (all closed). We only had a basic idea of where "The Book Thing" was, so we ended up walking a few blocks to reach it.

"The Books Thing" itself was located in what looked like a former auto repair shop. The books were organized by subject matter, but not by author. This turned out to be good enough. I like exploring for books, so this turned out to be a fun hunt.

After looking around for a while, we ran into a first. I was ready to leave a book store before my wife. She needed time to prepare herself to face such an unfamiliar neighborhood.

Our plan was that after visiting "The Book Thing", we would walk to a nearby McDonald's which the wife found on Google Maps and we drove by on the way in. From there we planned to call a taxi using the cell phone that we brought in.

The McDonald's itself is perhaps a half-mile away. It was still morning, so we expected a comfortable walk. In terms of weather, the walk was very comfortable. In terms of environment however, it was a bit odd.

Everyone we passed on the street seemed to stare at us. In my short life, I have been to about 8 countries and I have never felt as out-of-place as I did in this neighborhood. We felt that we belonged

as much in this neighborhood as a zebra would in Manhattan.

In order to explain our level of comfort in the neighborhood, I should mention our last jaunt to a similar area. Nearly a year ago in New York City, we unexpectedly found ourselves in a Harlem subway stop with a three-foot wide FAO Schwartz bag. We belonged there much more than we did in this neighborhood.

I never felt in any immediate danger (though I certainly would have expected to given the look of the neighborhood). I couldn't tell if those around us felt in danger by our presence (though decked out, as we were, in our typical "Eddie Bauer" fashion, I can't imagine how anyone could see trouble from us).

Among the people we passed were several people sitting on the street who watched us go by, a couple who stared at us as though we were aliens or hostiles, and a group of men having a loud argument.

Near the end of our walk we saw a handful of people breaking into a gray sedan. It could have been owned by one of the people breaking in, but I didn't ask.

When we reached the McDonald's, we went in to place the call but found the music too loud. We stepped out to call a cab and I noticed that one was sitting at the curb. I looked to see if he had a passenger, but couldn't see one.

The cabby was eating an apple and looked friendly. I asked him if he was available. He looked at me strangely for a second or two and then said "Yeah, be just a minute."

So, we stepped away from the cab and waited. A few minutes later, a woman got out of the cab. I apologized for not having seen her. She said that was OK, but hollered at the cabbie to come back soon.

He told her he just had to drop us off and then he would be back. It seemed clear that he was cutting into his lunch break to remove the foreigners from the neighborhood.

In the cab, after a brief discussion of the whether, he asked what we were doing in this neighborhood. We told him. He said that if we had walked just a few blocks further and turned right (I'm still not sure further what direction), the cops would have stopped us.

He said that the police stop anyone who looks so out of place in this neighborhood - the clear implication being that people from outside the neighborhood only came there to buy narcotics. I asked him how he could tell we weren't from the neighborhood, and he chuckled and said "Just by first glance. You can always tell."

After he dropped us off, we assessed our situation. We spent \$15 each way in cab fair for a total of \$30 on cabs. I got one free book with a slightly torn cover and list price of \$5.95. We took every bit of cash we had in to a neighborhood in which we had no business being.

If I had it to do over again, I would probably leave the excess cash (and my wife) at the hotel.