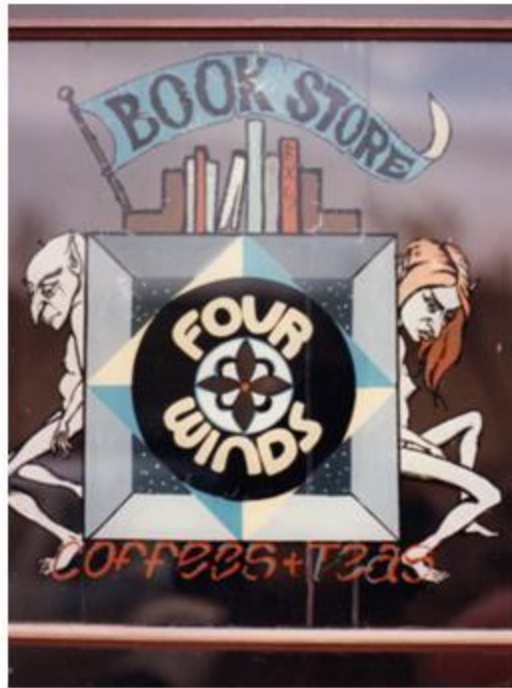


# **The Four Winds**

**Richard Denner**



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The Four Winds Bookstore sign on the title page  
was painted by Mikhail Stahm.



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I could have followed in my father’s footsteps. The path was there, and I did work for a short time in the Administrative Services Department of the State Farm Insurance Company, in Berkeley, as a bindery clerk. After a fist fight on the loading dock, following an argument over a lunchtime poker game—a fight without a decided winner—I realized this was not exactly what was meant by “fighting your way to the top.” I was told by my supervisor that no one was going to call the Big Boss onto the carpet and that I needed to think about my actions and how they reflected upon my father.

My father most likely had heard about his son’s behavior, because he was soon to suggest I take my wife (Patricia) and baby daughter (Kirsten) to live at the family’s beach house in Aptos, where I would re-enroll in school at Cabrillo College, then in Watsonville (“the Artichoke Capitol of the World”). I decided it was an opportunity to reinvent myself and rebuild my grade point average. Plentiful avocados would be a perk.

I no longer aspired to be a brain surgeon, and when I departed the chemistry laboratory at U.C. Berkeley, mid-way through my quantitative analysis class, I threw a chemical “unknown” into the trash can. I wanted to be a poet. Where this notion came from only the Muse knows. The Denner family had no tradition of artists. Perhaps, it was a combination of wanting to find redemption in the English Department of the soul as well as a nudge from the ghost of Joaquin Miller, a flamboyant 19th century California poet, who had once lived near our family home in the Oakland hills. The books you would have found on the shelves of my father’s den—*How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, *The Extra Mile*—were books of practical wisdom, but what I really needed was something to stimulate my increasingly active imagination.

In 1965, I attended the Berkeley Poetry Conference, two weeks of high-octane poetic stimulation,

and it was through the advice of living poets that I gained courage to start my own business. At one gathering, I told Gary Snyder that I had plans to go to Alaska, make my fortune, and open a bookstore in Berkeley. Gary said, "Berkeley has enough bookstores. You should go to the hinterlands and find a town that needs an infusion of culture and start a Berkeley bookstore there." I asked Allen Ginsberg, "Can I be a good poet and a good businessman at the same time?" Allen said, "Just be good!"

I might note that in the practical side of my quest, I was inspired by Edgar Guest and envisioned *finding a little place along the roadside where I could be a friend to man*. The Four Winds Bookstore, selling new and used books, gourmet coffees and teas, cards and prints and gifts, opened at 204 East 4th Street, in Ellensburg, Washington, in 1978. I had not made my fortune in Alaska, but my friend, Sid Thomas, had done well by working on the oil pipeline. Sid offered Cheri and I seed money, and with some of the money we bought *The Coffee Conspiracy* from Christie Brown. Sid went a step further and married Christie, not realizing that the business of business is business. Their marriage didn't last nor did Cheri's and mine.



After twelve years of marriage, I—years away from becoming a Buddhist monk—was a single man, again. Cheri kept possession of our house and our son, Theo, and I kept the Four Winds. In a few years, Sid would want out of the partnership, needing some ready cash, and I gave him all I had in savings. I'm sure he expected a greater return on his investment, but Sid said the amount would suffice. The Four Winds was never a money-maker. I made a modest living, breaking even, getting by, as the store grew in size. But the store was a success in other ways. In the twenty years I was sole proprietor

of this independent bookstore, I looked forward to work and would open my shop with a feeling of gratitude and glee.

I remember the day I became a member of the American Booksellers Association, when I received a decal to put in the window, a red binder with data and forms to make single orders from publishers, and a poster with a picture of Charlie Chaplin embracing a young woman (maybe Mary Pickford) with a caption that read, "Booksellers Make Better Lovers!" I was in business.

It's an angst-ridden condition, bouncing from job to job, with people asking you what you do and you wondering what you want to be. You say, "I haven't made up my mind" or "I'm just a Student of Life." Now, I had a profession. Once, a guy came up to me at a party and said, "Oh, I know who you are; you're Four Winds Books, Coffee and Tea." "Yep," I said, "that's me."

I learned the basics of buying and selling books from Moe Mavkowitz of Moe's Bookstore, that is in Berkeley. Cheri and I worked well as a team, and Moe took a liking to us, as a young couple. He had a trade policy, where you could bring your



old books into the store and be given hard cash or be given a piece of *Moe money*, which had the terms of trade printed on one side and a picture of Moe in a top hat, holding a glass of champagne, in the center of a facsimile of a dollar bill, designed by a cartoonist, named Joel Beck.

In days before you could buy books on Amazon, chain bookstores ruled the market. New books were bought directly from publishers or from wholesale warehouses, usually at 60% of the retail price, but chain stores bought in volume, which gave them a strong competitive edge. On the other hand, used books are bought from a variety of sources—from private libraries, from other dealers at discount, from garage sales, and directly from customers in the store. The bookseller makes an appraisal that the customer is willing to accept, one amount in cash and one in trade. There is an art to making this value determination. Moe had honed it to a science.

The Four Winds was a fusion of the different bookstores I loved to haunt. Creed's Bookstore was on Telegraph Avenue, in Berkeley, between Haste and Channing, mid-block on the west side of the street. Mr. Creed was known as Big Daddy, who may have gotten his nickname because, with his bulk and his beard, he resembled the folk singer and actor, Burl Ives, who had played the character "Big Daddy" in the movie version of *The Cat on the Hot Tin Roof*. Big Daddy sat in the front of his store at a large desk, and he could often be found playing chess with one of his friends. You put the books you had to sell on the edge of his desk with the spines facing him, and between chess moves he would scan the titles and give you a dollar amount. You could take the cash or leave with your books. If he bought the books, a crone wearing tennis shoes would appear from the deep shadows of the stacks to take them back into the already clogged aisles.



Farrel's little cubby hole was another story. It was located just south of Dwight Way on the east side of Telegraph Avenue. Mr. Farrel usually sat behind a high counter, wearing a Japanese silk robe and sipped whiskey from a water glass that he kept hidden under the counter. He liked to engage you in a discussion of whatever book you might be considering. As a bookseller, I also

developed an ability to palaver about a book. Farrel's was where I discovered a section of older volumes that initiated my life-long interest in antiquarian books. More specifically, I began to form an interest in archives and manuscripts. Also, I recall a young, female Beatnik, wearing dark eyeshadow, doing some dusting.

Cody's was begun by Fred Cody, on the north side of campus, in the late '50s. It was an innovative enterprise because it was one of the first bookstores to only sell paperback books. Later, Cody built a beautifully designed store, on the south side of campus, on the corner of Haste and Telegraph, where he expanded my inventory and began a reading series that lasted for over forty years, until that store closed in 2006. There were photos of great poets and novelists (and a president) hanging in the gallery. A stoical Philip Whalen looked at a smiling Bill Clinton in adjacent frames. I read some of my poems there, in 2002.

City Lights, at the intersection of Columbus and Broadway in San Francisco, was founded, in 1953, by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and published many of the Beat poets. It became famous after publishing *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg, that led to an important obscenity trial, that concluded with Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti being exonerated. I would drop by this bookstore anytime I was in the area and browse and maybe buy a book. My all-time favorite City Lights book is *Kora in Hell* by William Carlos Williams. I remember crossing the street after buying a copy and reading this book at Enrico's coffeehouse. I would develop my D Press in tandem with a bookstore and coffeehouse. Ferlinghetti, still going strong, just turned 100.

Powell's Books, in Portland, made me realize a bookstore might have no limits in terms of size. A rabbit warren of books, Powell's claims to be the largest independent bookstore in the world. It is actually an interconnected chain of bookstores surrounded by a town. This bookstore might be the archetype of the Library of Babel described by Borges:

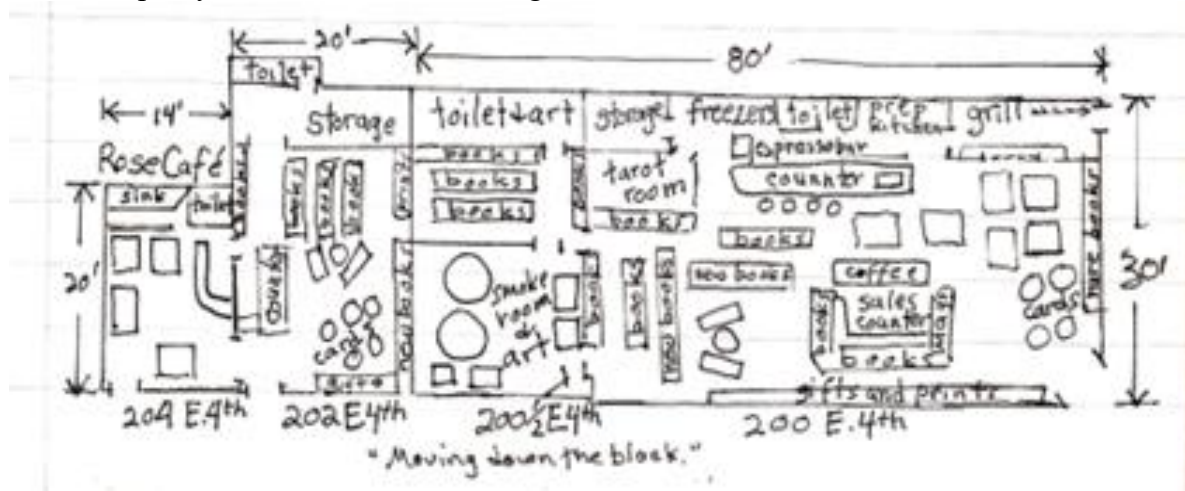
The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries.

The geometry of the structure does not resemble Powell's, but the possibility that it contains all the books in the world definitely gives the store a touch of the sublime.

Seattle's Elliot Bay Bookstore, in the Pioneer District, only sold new books, but downstairs there was a café surrounded by shelves of hardback books by authors whose works were no longer in demand. Much later, when Four Winds moved to the corner of 4th and Pine, my son, Theo, and I developed a café surrounded by shelves of books that were for sale. I wanted to offer a juicy hamburger with a thick romance novel on the side, but Theo said that this was obscene. His idea was to serve wholesome, well-prepared food for a reasonable price. Theo had gone to culinary school in Seattle and worked both ends of the spectrum, from road-side truckers' cafés to high-end cuisine hotels. I opted to sell books by the pound, using a scale left by the previous owner.

But, before that move, Four Winds was still at 202 E. 4th, and a man opened a cigar shop and newsstand next door. The enterprise was short-lived, and when he moved, after he had finally alienated his clientele with his bigoted remarks, I cut a hole in the wall and established Café Rose, the first espresso bar (with the second espresso machine, after the one at the Valley Café) in eastern

Washington. I enjoyed the size and decor of this store and was quite content but hearing that the fancy housewares store on the corner was closing and that the space was being considered by the owner of a chain of used bookstores, I made a wise business decision. One of the things I had learned by then was that business does not remain static, and it's best to take advantage of opportunities. I phoned my landlady and told her my plan. I was lucky to have a landlady who appreciated having a bookstore in her building. Miss Reed, an elderly spinster, said she remembered a bookstore with a samovar, when she was a college student, and wished me luck. She, also, kept my rent the same. In this regard, Miss Reed was a true mentor to Four Winds.



Ellensburg is a college town. Ellensburg is also a rodeo town. Ellensburg Rodeo is a major stop on the rodeo circuit. For my bookstore to survive in Ellensburg, I catered to a wide clientele—students, professional people, ranch wives, cowboys, the physically and mentally disabled, and professors from the local university. You might encounter Professor Hood and Professor Goedecke discussing Descartes' mind-body dualism at one table and Lawrence, off his meds, going into a narcoleptic coma at the next table and falling face first into his food.

I kept up with the trends and sold best-sellers that would help pay the rent. Initially, I had an extensive highbrow literary inventory, rode the wave of New Age titles, and finally settled on a general inventory, where Stephen King subsidized the plays of Shakespeare. My *raison d'état* was to have the right book for the right person at the right time at the right price.

When Theo and I opened Four Winds Bookstore and Café, on the corner of 4th and Pine, in 1995, the Daily Record newspaper announced that "Richard and Theo Donner have formally reopened Four Winds Bookstore." The proofreader missed the reference to the infamous Donner Party that reverted to cannibalism while crossing the Sierra Nevada Mountains, into California, during the 19th century. A maître d' calls out, "Donner, party of four!"

On a less grisly note, I can relate to a story I heard Bob Hope tell on TV about selling newspapers, when he was a kid in New York City—a limo pulled up to the curb, a hand extended out of the window holding a five-dollar bill (an enormous sum of money in those days), and a man asked for a newspaper. Hope didn't have enough money to make change and lost the sale. The young Hope, who in time not only became a famous comedian but also an astute businessman, was given a piece of sagely advice—"Always have plenty of inventory on hand and enough money to make change." This from John D. Rockefeller.

I built my business by continually increasing my inventory. The town folk had an insatiable hunger for my choice of merchandise, whether it was a mainstream novel or something a little off beat. Still, cash flow was a continual problem, and I relied, like most retailers, on the Christmas season to make enough revenue to pay delinquent bills and get a foothold on the coming year. Still, by tax time, I'd be hurting and would leave the Four Winds in the capable hands of one of my friends and go into the woods to plant trees. I was lucky in my choice of managers, but Theo was to learn that not all his friends were honest.



An important business lesson I learned about retailing was the damage caused by a shoplifter. This might have been the fruit of my own earlier karma, as a book thief. One stolen book creates a loss to the store that is hard to recover. With the margin of profit on a new book being 40% and the cost of overhead being close to 15%, the loss of an individual item demands reaping the profit of three books of the same price to break even. Now, I understood the ramifications of my rascality years before, when I stole a hefty tome on macroeconomic theory and was arrested for trying to sell it back to a clerk in the same store.

These were fruitful years (the twenty years purifying my karma). A coffeehouse-bookstore is a special kind of institution, and even if, sometimes, Four Winds was referred to as a den of iniquity—it was a lively place to hang out, share knowledge, and create revolution. It was a place for my children to grow up and learn about the world. It was a place for me, after much drifting and dawdling, to become a member of a community. And, yes, it was a place to meet potential lovers—but not, I learned, a place to harass my help. Having stood too close to one young woman who worked for me, I was told, “Don’t you sidle up to me in that fashion, or I’ll file a sexual harassment complaint.” Luckily, I learned this important lesson long before the Me-Too Movement.

The Four Winds was a bit of Berkeley on one of Ellensburg’s side streets, and I believe it was (and Ellensburg still is) a cosmic hub, resting harmoniously on a set of sacred ley lines. I’ve talked about the way Four Winds evolved from Berkeley bookstores—bookstores of an independent nature, in turn evolving from a lineage of bookstores. Berkeley’s Shakespeare & Co. takes its name from a Parisian bookstore named Shakespeare & Co.—one that was started by Sylvia Beach, in the early 1920s, where aspiring young writers gathered.



So, in a travel-analogy of a day in vintage Paris-Ellensburg, I would get a cappuccino (definitely not a café au lait, as that was invented in Berkeley, in the '60s) and a croissant at Café Rose on Fourth Avenue and sit and listen to John Bennett relate one his adventures with Charles Bukowski during a visit to San Francisco, or I'd go next door to the Four Winds to a book-signing party for Jan Kerouac's *Baby Driver*, and in the afternoon, I'd drop by



Don Brontsema's studio, above the Historical Museum, to view one of his paintings, maybe one of the Lone Ranger on Silver, galloping across the top of the Davidson Building. When the clock struck midnight, I'd rendezvous with some friends at the Cornerstone, a hangout for hard-core night owls or I'd head for a dance hall, like The Ranch, to hear The Screaming Trees. Not exactly the East Bank or Montmartre but great fun and definitely true to the Bohemian lifestyle.



Ellensburg is a small town. I had created a watering hole for the mentally and physically thirsty—a traditional literary bookstore with new age overtones—a place for poetry, music, art, politics, books, coffee, tea, and food to nourish the soul of the community. Again, Ellensburg is a small town, and as I had a history of wild romance—at one point having two ex-wives and two different lovers living on the same street, within a short distance of one another—a small town, indeed—I found that, after twenty years of being the sole-proprietor of this fantastic bookstore and coffeehouse, the time to move on had arrived.

I dug into my occult knapsack and, once again, reinvented myself. Why not become a reincarnated Tibetan lama? The Englishman, T. Lapsang Rampa, had done it. So, why not me? If a Berkeley Beatnik could become an Ellensburg cowboy, why not a Tibetan Buddhist lama? I saw a sign, a literal sign, in my shop window, inviting me to attend a meeting with a Tibetan lama at a

Presbyterian church, in Seattle. I remembered a couple of Sufi pith instructions—"God is the curse, and God is the cure." Also, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear."

While listening to Sogyal Rinpoche transmit the Dzogchen view, I had the experience of being one with the guru. Without further hesitation, I quit drinking, sold the Four Winds to my son, pointed my pony toward the East, and followed a path that led me nearer to Luminous Peak.

# PHOTO GALLERY





