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BOOKSHELF | SAM ROBERTS

Engaging Readers; Preserving Storefronts

IT SOUNDED LIKE a setup for a joke: Guy comes up to you on the street and starts talking about an overcrowded school in a cruddy old building, but with hard-working students, ambitious teachers and lots of spirit. That conversation a few years ago led to David Denby's "Lit Up: One Reporter. Three Schools. Twenty-Four Books That Can Change Lives" (Henry Holt, \$30).

Mr. Denby, a writer and former film critic for The New Yorker, returned to Columbia University when he was 48 and wrote "Great Books," which explored the effect of the Western classics on college students. This is something of a prequel, thanks to his serendipitous encounter a few years ago with Samuel E. Abrams, a teacher on leave from the Beacon School on Manhattan's West Side. (Mr. Abrams has since written his own provocative book, "Education and the Commercial Mindset"; Beacon has since moved to a snazzier new home.)

As he did with "Great Books," Mr. Denby embedded himself in the school (and later in Mamaroneck High School in Westchester and James Hillhouse High School in New Haven), and he invites readers to witness the effect of committed teachers (all union members, as it happens) and of Ruth Lacey, the indomitable principal who helped found Beacon as an alternative public high school in 1993, as they transform students reared on digital devices ("books smell like old people," one student says) into engaged readers of serious literature.

Thanks to Mr. Denby and Sean Leon, the hospitable Irish-born English teacher who provides a window into his 10th-grade class, "Lit Up" is a refreshing lesson in what motivates students and why not to dumb down reading lists. The theme of his class was the individual and society. The outcome proves



VIA "STORE FRONT II: A HISTORY PRESERVED"

A shop on West Fourth Street in Greenwich Village, in 2009, from "Store Front II."

how much one individual can make a difference.

In one passage, a class is assigned Victor Frankl's "The Search for Meaning," an account of life in Nazi concentration camps. The students are asked about the purpose of life, and one young woman replies: "We're fifteen. We don't have a concrete purpose." Then she added, "My purpose in life is to find a purpose, if that makes any sense."

TIRED OF THE SAME old banks, chain drug-stores, coffee bars and fast food franchises proliferating in your neighborhood? Savor "Store Front II: A History Preserved, the Disappearing Face of New York" (Ginkgo Press, \$65), by James T. Murray and Karla L. Murray.

Nearly two-thirds of the 325 mom-and-pop stores the couple photographed for their first volume, published in 2008, have already vanished. Now they take a second look, providing not only arresting images of

threatened one-of-a-kind enterprises, but also their back stories through interviews with the owners.

"James and Karla are photographers by trade," David Lopes writes in his introduction, "but their photographs often push past art and documentation into the realm of literature."

THE VISIONARY HIGH LINE on Manhattan's West Side is a hit at less than two miles long. Imagine unleashing the same resourcefulness in the 700 miles of forbidding corridors under the city's elevated subway lines and highways.

In "Under the Elevated: Reclaiming Space, Connecting Communities," the Design Trust for Public Space and the city's Department of Transportation collaborated to mine the potential of those crepuscular spaces for everything from skateboarding to farmers' markets. (The book is available for \$30 at the Design Trust's website.)