

Living

The reinvented life An occasional look at Georgians who have embarked on a new path

Couple rewrite life



Avid readers become ardent owners of vintage book store.

With new undertaking, a new affection – cats.

By Michelle Hiskey
For the AJC

Bob Roarty and Jan Bolgia were always paper people, not cat people. They met while working at a printing company, married and churned out pages for people to buy – until they could barely take it any longer.

Enter the cats, and the store they called home. In this rustic storefront near DeKalb-Peachtree Airport, Roarty and Bolgia have reinvented themselves.

Atlanta Vintage Books is like 10 attics strung together, full of old volumes. Books that have, like the cats sauntering through the aisles, many different lives. Their stories transport readers to other worlds.

For serious readers, a bookstore is like a spa: While almost anyone can enjoy one, not everyone can successfully operate one. This couple realized their dream by transferring their skills with paper to working with people – and cats.

Many years ago, the pleasure of escape through books drew Roarty, now 57, through these same doors on the corner of Clairmont Road where feral cats dart about.

Roarty needed a way out of the 24/7 pressure of managing a commercial printer. "I was going to have a heart attack because I let my job do that to me," he said.

Roarty had always seen books as oases. Growing up the seventh of 10 children, he had watched his mother block out two hours a day to read.

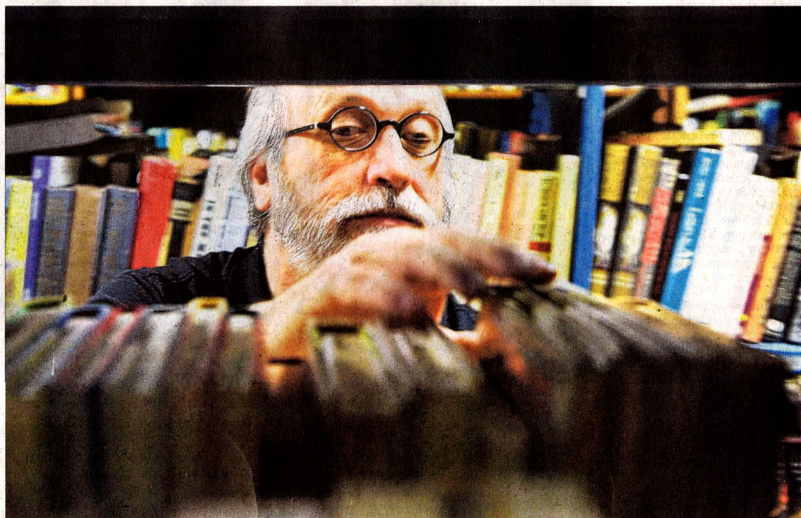
As a young adult in Atlanta, his idea of a night out was browsing at Oxford Books. He had turned Bolgia, now 54, on to his habit as their main way to be together. "We'd sit and talk to each other there," she said. "I grew to love book stores."

Roarty's quest when he first walked into Vintage books was to find a book that, as a child, he had never finished. It was about Hopalong Cassidy, and the last four pages were missing.

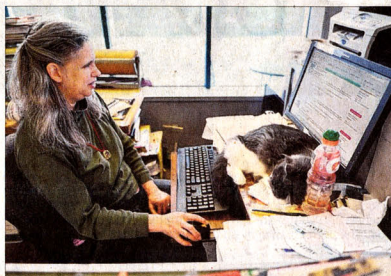
"I knew the good guy always wins," he said. "But I wanted to know how."

He didn't find what he was looking for, and Atlanta Vintage Books didn't impress him much.

His wife was open to change. She filled pages as a graphic designer, and loved



Bob Roarty searches for a book for a customer at Atlanta Vintage Books in Chamblee. Roarty and his wife quit their jobs and bought the bookstore in 2007. At first, he thought he'd only need to find book buyers, not more books. He learned otherwise. Photos by Bita Honarvar bthonarvar@ajc.com



Jan Bolgia, Roarty's wife, searches for a book online while Boo the cat naps on her desk at Atlanta Vintage Books. Bolgia, who'd worked as a graphic designer, was as eager for change as her husband.

stories in any form. As computers took over her industry, her biggest clients were leaving her hand-drawn work.

On Nov. 6, 2006, a Sunday – the only day of the week they had together – Roarty was depressed. Bolgia spotted a newspaper ad: Bookstore for Sale. What did they have to lose? The ad was placed by the previous Vintage owners.

"When I walked in that time [as a potential buyer], I looked at it with new eyes," Roarty said, seeing a loyal clientele and niche in the shadow of Amazon. "Wow, 70,000 books! Was this stuff amazing?"

"Oh my gosh, we can afford this," Bolgia recalled. The deal was final on Feb. 2,

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Bob Roarty
Lifelong book lover who, in 2007, became co-owner of Atlanta Vintage Books, a store that hadn't impressed him much when he'd first visited.

2007. "The main risk was if we didn't try, because this was our way out."

To keep the store going in this bad economy, the couple recently put their rental house in Virginia Highlands up for sale. From the start of their reinvention, they gave up dining out and cut back on luxuries.

As they commuted in their Honda, they flashed back to when they first dated and last worked side by side.

"She said, 'If we go down, we go down happy,'" said their next-door neighbor and good friend Laurel-Ann Doolley. "They live life in the present. They want their todays to be as good as they can make them."

The metaphor for their new life was the Vintage basement, so jammed with junk they had to excavate to find out what they now owned. Behind a wall of boxes and old computers was a trove of Atlanta Journals, National Geographic magazines, Tiffany catalogs, African masks, Styrofoam heads – "ephemera" that now lures local art students.

Roarty thought he needed only to find buyers, not more books. Wrong. People who buy old books from a live person – not the Internet – want to feel cozy and cared for.

"It's more like going to a friend's than a business," said Weyman Combs, 49, of Conyers, a longtime Vintage customer who visits weekly for new arrivals to the military

and aviation collection.

"I like to touch, feel, smell the books, and I have to see one before making a decision," he said. "Bob looks for what I want. He got a 1942 book of American aircraft that's one of my favorites, and a few months ago a two-volume set in Japanese of German aircraft from World War II. The weird finds are the best."

Roarty and Bolgia now preserve for others the reading refuge that they so valued during stressful times. Vintage is like "Cheers" for collectors of out-of-print hardbacks.

"When my father passed five years ago, I'd take off Saturday afternoon to get away and the bookstore was a peaceful place, my unwinding from the stress," Combs said.

On a dark rainy morning in early March, as Bolgia gave a tour of the store, the store's felines – adopted from the street – pattered through: Callie, Big Boo, Little Boo, Mickey and Frida. "She showed up with paint on her," Boagla said.

She and Roarty weren't always cat lovers, but the species grew on them and fit into the old store's atmosphere. They now purr quietly as the pages turn, the perfect mascots for a couple on their next life.

If you have an idea for The Reinvented Life, contact Michelle Hiskey at michelle.hiskey@gmail.com.