

## THE GREAT AMERICAN BOOK TOUR

### An Open Letter to the Independent Booksellers of America And to Their Customers

Recently, a bookseller friend asked me what, in my estimation, defined a great independent bookstore. Having just returned from my 100 – city tour of many of America’s finest indies, I’d like to reply, as follows.

First and foremost, what invariably characterizes a great independent bookstore is great booksellers. Just as, in a good school, everything begins and ends with the classroom teacher, independent bookstores are as good as their staff: period.

What, then, defines a great independent bookseller? Well, like the stores they work in, great booksellers are all different. In fact, I can’t think of a more individualistic group of professionals than my independent bookseller friends. In this respect, they represent the variety of American democracy at its best.

At the same time, great booksellers all seem to share two passions. Like Portland (Oregon’s) Carol Hushman, they are all “hopeless bibliophiles.” And like Richmond’s Kelly Justice (Fountain Books) all of our best indie booksellers “love people who love books.”

“My booksellers and I have a bad case of the bookstore habit and work for almost nothing,” Kris Kleindienst, owner of St. Louis’s fabled Left Bank Books, told me. Low pay, interminable hours, and damn little recognition are the lot of all independent booksellers. And while my book tour may have turned out to be more of a celebration of the bookselling profession than a lament, it wouldn’t do to underestimate the adversities that my indie bookseller friends deal with each and every day.

One summery afternoon in Buffalo Jonathon Welch, one of the most knowledgeable and passionate booksellers in America, stood in the world-class poetry section of his Talking Leaves Bookstore, discussing this subject. Jonathon gave me a sobering overview of the difficulties facing our rapidly-dwindling number of indie stores. In addition to the usual challenges posed by Amazon.com,

“superstores,” and electronic readers, he mentioned an unsettling trend in which older indie customers are passing away but not being replaced by an equivalent number of avid younger readers. The textbook business, long a reliable staple for Talking Leaves and other indies in college towns like Buffalo, has fallen off sharply lately. Then there’s the growing insistence on the part of many publishers that bookstores settle their accounts within thirty days of receiving new titles – often before reviews are out and author events have taken place. Furthermore, many publishers are cutting back on authors’ tours – a serious mistake in the opinion of virtually all booksellers. Not to mention the recent economic recession, which has hit both booksellers and book buyers equally hard.

What’s more, it’s easy to forget that indie bookstore owners are also small-business proprietors, with all of the problems and uncertainties of any other struggling small-business owners in America. Some of their tribulations seem Job-like. Bookstores, for instance, are especially susceptible to fire. “Full Circle Announces 10,000 Books at Fire Sale,” a yellowing old newspaper article on the wall of Oklahoma’s premier indie bookstore begins. The story goes on to report how, thirty years ago, a “less than fastidious fry cook” at the hash joint adjacent to Full Circle Books let a grease fire get out of hand. Minutes later, the entire block was aflame. Thousands of books were damaged or destroyed. The undaunted owner of Full Circle held a fire sale and rebuilt the business, though for some years afterward Full Circle customers could be identified by the “smoky aroma” of their books.

Joan Grenier’s renowned Odyssey Books in South Hadley, MA, rose from the ashes of *two* major bookstore fires. Rebecca Willow and Mary Harris’s Seattle-area (Kirkland, WA) Parkplace Books was flooded out, with the beautiful, white-oak events alcove a foot under water. Likewise MacDonald’s Books in Estes Park, CO, though in both cases dozens of loyal customers pitched in to help move books to higher ground. On their way to the (great) fiction section of Jane Laclergue’s lovely Fireside Books, in Olympia, WA, patrons step over the long, jagged crack that went shivering through the Italianate marble floor during an earthquake. A few hundred miles to the south, the Great Quake of 1989 totally demolished Santa Cruz Books. One hundred intrepid customers signed liability waivers and ventured

inside the ruins of this West Coast literary landmark to rescue the books. The store then *operated out of a tent on the sidewalk* for three years before moving across the street to its current location.

Volcanic eruptions, anyone? After Mt. St. Helens blew in 1980, Carol Hushman and her then-colleagues spent a whole year dusting fine, volcanic ash off the books at downtown Portland's Powell's City of Books. Indie bookstores are also especially vulnerable to theft. Books are easy pickings for shoplifters, not to mention inside pilfering. In her acclaimed memoir *The King's English*, Salt Lake bookseller Betsy Burton chronicles the sad story of a bright and likeable young employee who "systematically and cold-bloodedly" stole several thousand dollars from her store over a two-year period.

So how, faced with all of these trials and then some, do indie booksellers manage to stay in business? Well, a lot of them don't. Those who have managed to hang on and even flourish – at least in spirit – attribute their success and good fortune to several factors. When Gayle Shank's great Changing Hands Bookstore in Phoenix was struggling through its early years, a group of women customers established several book clubs expressly designed to help the store stay afloat. Gayle, Roberta Rubin of the Bookstall at Chestnut Court, Vivien Jennings of Rainy Day Books in Kansas City, Mary Gay Shipley (That Bookstore, Blytheville, Arkansas) and several other pioneering book-club advocates encouraged indie stores from the Atlantic to the Pacific to sponsor, and supply books to, clubs for readers of all ages and interests.

More than any other small *or* large businesses I know of, independent bookstores partner with other local enterprises and organizations to contribute to the cultural and social well-being of their communities. Vivien Jennings and her partner Roger Doeren, at Rainy Day Books, have joined forces with more than 60 Kansas City-area well-child clinics to provide a book for each boy and girl attending a clinic. During the Harry Potter "frenzy" (as one bookseller described Harry's latest coming-out extravaganza), stores from Linda Ramsdell's Galaxy, in northern Vermont (my personal bookstore!), to Corte Madera, CA's, wonderful Book Passage, donated their "Harry" profits to local schools or charitable organizations. Nancy Olson and her customers at Raleigh's world-class Quail Ridge Books in Raleigh sell the hundreds of publishers' galleys Nancy annually receives. With the proceeds, they provide

thousands of underprivileged children with books. To date, the program has given away more than 50,000 books, often to children who have never owned one. In Rockport, MA, Toad Hill Books has been affiliated with a non-profit local environmental organization from its inception. Recently, the store partnered with this group and local schools to save coastal “vernal pools” – spring breeding grounds for frogs, salamanders, snakes and water birds.

So yes, our great indie booksellers – including those brave bibliophiles who toil in the cavernous depths of America’s mega-bookstores – are indeed lovers. Lovers of books, of “people who love books,” of nature and history and poetry and all aspects of our culture that make us, in the best sense, human. Don’t be fooled, though. Independent booksellers have time and again proven themselves to be fierce fighters, as well. When our constitutional freedoms to read, write, and sell books are threatened, indie booksellers are America’s first and most effective line of defense against any and all abridgements of our First Amendment rights.

Along with several hundred of her colleagues, and many of America’s librarians, my close friend and Vermont neighbor, Linda Ramsdell, fought tooth and nail against the unconstitutional breaches of privacy of the so-called Patriot Act. On the day I visited Politics and Prose Books, in Washington D. C., the store owners were off receiving the Bill of Rights Award from the ACLU for “uniquely demonstrating how the freedoms of speech and the press contribute to the public good.” Then there’s Susan Novotny, owner of Albany’s marvelous Bookhouse at Stuyvesant Plaza. In 1993 – the year 11 Capital District bookstores went out of business – Susan joined 25 other bookseller litigants in a successful lawsuit brought in San Francisco against unfair business arrangements between publishers and the mega-bookstores. (Susan bought a new rug for the store with part of her settlement.) So it isn’t surprising that many indie booksellers – Tom Campbell of Durham’s Regulator Bookstore, Jonathan Welch of Buffalo’s Talking Leaves, Vivien Jennings of Rainy Day Books in Kansas City; the list goes on and on – are veterans of the civil rights or anti-war movements of the 1960’s and 70’s. They are our true constitutionalists. If we do not support them, and their rights not to be discriminated against by corporate

America, as they have supported us and our rights to read and write what we wish, our democracy will be the weaker for it.

On a lighter note, one of the highlights of my recent book tour was meeting the three magnificent Bernese mountain dogs at Susan Morgan's fine Yankee Bookshop in Woodstock, VT. I was delighted when Mamasita, the famous store cat and *de facto* manager of the renowned Square Books in Oxford, Mississippi, jumped up on the lectern and began purring during my reading there. Big, white Diggory at Erie (PA) Books has the run of the store. No mice in the first-rate regional history section on Diggory's watch, I'll assure you. Sugar, the Welty terrier at Natchez's Turning Pages, danced a stately minuet for me at my meet-and-greet breakfast event in that excellent indie high on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi. As for the belted Galloway cattle that greet visitors turning into McIntyre's Books in central N.C., they're worth driving clear from New England to see. (So is the "mystery-novel room" at McIntyre's.)

I love the two well-fed Siamese store cats at Lorelei Books in Vicksburg, and Verusha, the bibliophile Russian land tortoise in the children's store of Bear Pond Books (a long-time landmark) in Montpelier, VT. Oh, and Lemony Snickett, the brash yellow tomcat at Collette Morgan's renowned children's bookstore in Minneapolis, the Wild Rumpus. Kids also flock to the store to see Collette's coal-black lizard from Mali, her free-ranging Seebright chicken, tank of iridescent tetras in the restroom, the store's resident pair of ferrets and, in the dungeon below the "haunted house," two friendly rats. (Encouragingly, many children's bookstores, including the Wild Rumpus, are holding their own economically in these parlous times.)

At Anderson's Books in Naperville, on the western fringe of Chicago – one of my all-time favorite American bookstores – I had my photograph taken reading to an attentive audience of life-sized, stuffed emperor penguins borrowed from the children's section. I was similarly honored to meet Cecily, Gertrude, and a dozen other beautifully carved white geese at Kristine Kaufman's magical Snow Goose Books in northwest Washington state. (Kristine, a former Fullbright scholar and a renowned bookseller, confided to me that Cecily's favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*.)

Richmond's Kelly Justice told me that the cat at her previous store outlasted three owners. She died in her sleep, at the ripe old age of 21, in the front window, surrounded by books. What a way to go! E. B. White writes that cats "introduce a note of comfort into a room." Animals also seem to add a home-like and humanizing touch to a business. "Two cats live here," a shelf-talker notice informs customers at Vintage Books in Vancouver, WA. "Eliza is a tortoise-shell manx. She is shy but loves to cuddle if you sit by her and talk softly. Henry is a variegated rascal with a long tail. He is not cuddly. Occasionally, you will see one of them walking along the tops of the bookcases. Please give them space and respect."

Under the sign of the great blue heron weathervane atop Darwin Ellis and Ellen Burns' fabled Books on the Common, in Ridgefield, CT, Darwin remarked to me that sometimes their bookstore reminds him of "a neighborhood bar without the alcohol."

It's a fact. In an indie bookstore, everyone is welcome, and the range of conversations – religion to politics, sports to travel to community events – is limitless. As a writer perpetually on the look-out for new stories, I've found some of my most promising material in independent bookstores. A few years ago my good friend Connie Appel, co-owner with Peggy Holliday of New London, NH's, lovely Morgan Hill Books, told me a story about her great, great grandfather, which inspired my Civil War novel, *Walking to Gatlinburg*. A customer of Madison, CT's, fabled R. J. Julia Bookstore drove many miles to tell me an anecdote I've used in my current novel-in-progress.

At Square Books in Oxford, MS, Lynne Roberts, one of the very best and most gracious bookstore events coordinators in the country, told me the following story. A local author received an exceptionally mean-spirited review. The reviewer himself then wrote a book, which his publisher blithely sent to the offended southern writer for a jacket blurb. The Mississippi author was away when the galleys arrived but his wife, who was even more incensed over the nasty review, returned the galley to the publisher – full of buckshot. The reviewer-turned-novelist interpreted this gesture as a death-threat and steered clear of Mississippi on his book tour.

The most inspiring bookstore story I heard on my tour was Romeo Grenier's. Nearly one hundred years ago, as a small boy knowing not a word of English, Romeo came to America from Canada

with his mother and brothers and sisters, in a horse-drawn wagon containing all their earthly possessions. Decades later, this famous Upper Connecticut River Valley autodidact and bibliophile founded the Odyssey Bookstore in the back of his over-the-counter drugstore in South Hadley, MA. Today, a citation to Romeo from the Mount Holyoke College Board of Trustees hangs on the wall of the Odyssey, recognizing him as “the most learned apothecary since John Keats.”

Like South Hadley’s Odyssey, now owned and operated by Romeo’s daughter, bookseller par excellence Joan Grenier, many of the bookstores I visited are multi-generational enterprises. Some of the best-known are Northshire in Manchester Center, VT, Rainy Day Books in Kansas City, New England Mobile Book Fair in Newton, MA, and Powell's City of Books in Portland, Oregon. (Emily Powell is the third-generation of the Powell family to operate the business. Staff members swear that the ghost of her grandfather, Walter, still can be sighted from time to time, browsing through the fiction or travel section of the downtown location.) Indie bookstores are also often owned and operated by husband-and-wife teams, like Darwin Ellis and Ellen Burns of Books on the Common, Rick and Ellen Havlak, of the Bennington VT Bookshop (Vermont’s oldest bookstore) Lynne and Bill Reed of Chester, VT’s, great Misty Valley Books, and David and Beth Kanell of Kingdom Books in Waterford, VT. All four of which, by the way, host some of the best book events in America.

Two of my favorite American bookstores feature unique works of art. Painted on the floor near the front window of Katie O’Laughlin’s Village Books in Pacific Palisades, CA, is a portrait of Yeats, Joyce, and several other famous writers seated around a table, deep in conversation. Sitting with them is a man with a kind and thoughtful face. It’s Katie’s father, Michael O’Laughlin, who inspired Katie’s love of books when she was a little girl by telling her stories from *The Odyssey* on the long walks they took together. Katie told me that she rarely closes the store at the end of the day without sitting down in a nearby chair for a goodnight visit with her dad.

Three thousand miles away, in the Green Mountain village of Brandon, VT, Matthew Gibbs and Barbara Ebling’s great Briggs Carriage indie sits just across the street from the village green. As you enter the bookstore for the first time, you’ll see something you’ve never seen before. It’s a gorgeous,

multi-colored compass rose, eight feet in diameter, which Matthew painted on the floor. He inscribed the names of his and Barbara's favorite authors – Shakespeare, Faulkner, Cervantes, Melville, and many others – around the perimeter of the compass. Inside the rose is the store's motto: "A World of Books in a Small Vermont Town."

I wish I had space to say something personal about every independent bookseller in America. Yet what distinguishes those I've mentioned – their extraordinary erudition and diligence, their commitment to readers and writers and books and our precious constitutional freedoms – is true of them all. "We're salmon swimming upstream," my long-time friend Mike DeSanto, owner of Vermont's wonderful Phoenix Books, in Essex Center, told me recently. It's the perfect image, capturing the energy, courage, and hopefulness of all booksellers everywhere, and their determination to battle on against all odds for the simple reason that it is their nature and mission to do so. Humans are indeed the reading species. When we cease to read, we will be less human by just that much.

To the independent booksellers of America, then, from this reader, two short but heartfelt words:  
Thank you.

Howard Frank Mosher