



Judging by their cover

By: Kyle Barr March 25, 2016 1 Comment

Canio's Bookstore in Sag Harbor is saturated in literature. The books are piled on top of each other, sitting both vertically and horizontally on shelves, bookcases and chairs, like controlled chaos. It is saturated by the smell of gingerbread and mildew. It's a dry smell, the smell of old books. The wood floors creak with a presence and life.

"It is an old English bookstore. There is an authenticity you can't replicate," said Kathryn Szoka, co-owner of Canio's Bookstore for a little over 16 years. The well-curated selection is handpicked, and Szoka tries to personalize it for clients.

"It's a cross between a confessional and a bartender," she said of her position.

While bookstores have been struggling for several years, reports now say physical books are on the rise. The Association of American Publishers last reported on March 2 that trade book revenues were up 2.5 percent in Oct. 2015 compared to the same point in 2014. For the same period, e-books were down 12.3 percent. The AAP reported receiving \$1.28 billion in revenue from e-books and \$4.75 billion from printed publications from January through November 2015.

"I think that rumors of our death are greatly exaggerated," said Oren Teicher, CEO of the American Booksellers Association. "There has been a massive growth of the localism movement, which has been huge. The data shows 10s of millions of consumers making decisions to shop locally...we certainly have benefited more from it."

Teicher said the data represents not a decline in e-book sales as much as a leveling off, but this has been a long-awaited reprieve for independent bookstore owners and prospective owners. The ABA stated that, nationally, new stores are opening, and retiring owners of existing bookstores are finding buyers.

In Harbor Books, a new bookstore that opened at the tail end of 2015, a mural is pressed into the wall in the middle of the store. Against a background of swirling incandescent chalk and a foreground of a small sailing ship emerging from the pages of a book reads a poem grandiosely arguing against the loss of the brick-and-mortar bookstore.

The poem originated from Beatrice Warde, an early 20th century communicator on typography, and was adapted for a bookstore in England called The Albion Beatnik Books, which opened in 2008.

"It's become our mantra," said Taylor Berry, the owner of Harbor Books.

Berry bought the space Nov. 7 and built the store in 22 days.

"We didn't sleep," she said.

Berry's store is longer than it is wide, with bookshelves lining both sides and red lights giving off a warm glow to a dark space.

Even with the mantra staring back at the counter from across the room, Berry understands that e-books aren't going away, and that bookstores need to adapt to the current market. She sells e-books from her website, and often finds that many people have become hybrid readers, reading both electronic and physical books; sometimes they pick up copies of the same title in both forms.

"I think fighting that tide is a silly thing to do," she said. "I think we are trending toward something concrete and tactile, a sensory experience."

The slight gains that brick-and-mortar bookstores have attained is off-set by the fears of online bookselling, and more stores are trying to find new ways to operate or offer services that are not possible to get through the Internet.

Canio's Bookstore is partly nonprofit through its 501c3 Canio's Cultural Cafe.

"It's allowed us to navigate difficult times," Szoka said, noting nonprofits are tax-exempt.

Most bookstores offer writing and photography classes along with book clubs, author readings and other events.

Charline Spektor, who owned BookHampton for close to a half-century, recently sold her last two locations, in East Hampton and Southampton. Two of her previous employees, Greg Harris and Daniel Hirsch, bought the Southampton location and renamed it Southampton Books.

"This is the perfect location for a bookstore," Hirsch said. "The people around here love to read, and there are a ton of local authors around here."

In the small square space, white lamps shine onto white walls. The new owners looked to their favorite genres and own tastes to revamp the store's selection with books they liked and knew were popular. On the center table are a myriad of books from different genres, which the owners feel are, in the words of Harris, "great books that nobody knows about."

Along with a planned book delivery service in the summer, the owners took their own affinity for rare books and placed them on the shelves, selling more than \$1,000 worth of rare and signed books. They are planning for more author signings and talks as well as a Game of Thrones trivia event in April. Harris himself is a huge fan, and has read the series several times over.

The Internet has also presented a challenge for Book Revue in Huntington, one of the largest independent bookstores on Long Island.

"Business isn't like it was 15 years ago; shopping online has had an impact," said Robert Klein, co-founder of Book Revue. "People get information online; nonfiction and how-to books, they often get it online."

The store has expanded its business by selling in bulk to schools, libraries and nonprofits, and its strong brand and location in the heart of Huntington has allowed it to have several high-profile book signings, including Hillary Clinton during her book tour in 2014.

Book Revue has a cafe tucked away into the corner of its space, and Berry hopes for Harbor Books to create a similar space. While both Klein and Berry understand that coffee and literature complement each other, Carol Hoenig, the president and co-founder of Turn of the Corkscrew, a bookstore in Rockville Centre, thought wine would work just as well.

Hoenig's store offers a wine-and-cheese bar in the same space as the bookstore.

"It lends itself for people taking a glass and browsing the shelves," she said.

Hoenig waited until she saw the bookstore market start to make a comeback, and opened her store in Oct. 2015. Now her store not only offers the usual author talks and book clubs, but she was happy to boast a knitting circle that meets around her fireplace.

"We've already created that community, and I get so tickled when I see people gathered in our store, enjoying each other's company, talking books, enjoying a glass of wine," she said.

But while bookstores have been faring better than in recent years, sales are still down from where they were in past decades.

"We've had a lot of pessimism; bookselling is not an easy business, there are long hours and modest margins," Teicher said. "There are still clouds on the horizon. Online shopping is a huge factor, given Amazon's massive growth. There is the pressure on increasing minimum wage; we're grappling with ways to figure it out."

"You don't go into the book business to make money," Szoka said.

Edit

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Observer

March 26, 2016 at 8:54 am (Edit)

Nice feature story. The internet is great for many things, but i keep telling my self I'm going to take time to read a book – the kind that's best read by turning paper pages.