

# THE NEED

*In lean times, are books a luxury or an imperative? Recent evidence reveals that, while more discerning, bookstore customers nevertheless view books as valuable sustenance for mind and soul.*

By Joy Ferguson

A favourite example of the “recession-proof” nature of books is the fact that *Gone with the Wind* had sold one million copies by the end of 1936, its first year of publication. The author, Margaret Mitchell, believed the plot’s central theme of survival and the great love story nourished a nation starved for hope as it struggled through The Great Depression. Will history repeat itself? Are books still depression and recession proof? What do bookstore owners expect in this challenging economy?

“I have been in business for over 22 years, and have seen ups and downs before, so I am cautious, but optimistic about business,” says Suzanne Brooks, owner of Gulliver’s Quality Books and Toys in North Bay, ON.

Certainly consumers have less discretionary income. Reports confirm that sales of luxury goods are down across the marketplace. But do bookstore clientele consider their purchases necessities or luxury items?

On February 26, 2009, BookNet Canada posted 2009 results that stated that in the first few weeks of 2009 “unit sales were up 10 per cent and dollars sold up six per cent in January 2009 when compared to sales in the same time period of the 2008. In the six weeks ending February 15, 2009, volume increased almost nine per cent while the value increase remained steady at six per cent.” BookNet Canada CEO, Michael Tamblyn, reflected, “Considering the declines in consumer spending in other sectors, and the contraction of book sales in other countries, these numbers are a pleasant surprise. In tough times, Canadian consumers continue to see books as a source of education, entertainment and escape.” All figures for this report were drawn from BookNet Canada’s national book sales tracking sys-

tem, BNC SalesData, using the year-over-year sales from a fixed panel of 665 retail locations, which represents data from about 75 per cent of the Canadian book market, including chains; independents; online; college/university stores; and non-traditional bookstores, such as specialty and discount stores.

## **Why Are Book Sales Strong?**

Most booksellers surveyed are experiencing stronger sales than at this time last year. Betty and Bill Camp, co-owners of The Whirligig Book Shop in Shelburne, NS, have had several customers comment that “their best investment is in books for themselves or for gifts to others.” Camp adds, “A book is a quiet, inexpensive way to relax the mind and escape recession anxiety for a while.” Brooks agrees, “If you can’t afford to go out as often, it’s easy to justify the small luxury of a new novel to cocoon with.” With less discretionary income available to the average family, vacations are being replaced by “staycations,” and, to many, the chance to relax with a great book, especially one that transports the reader, is a must. Carolyn Wood, Executive Director of the Association of Canadian Publishers, explained to The Canadian Press that the book business has a history of being “recession-resistant.” “I think for one thing it’s a fairly low price point item. It’s not like buying a car or a new house or snowmobile or designer anything. Books are manageable. There is something for every budget. And reading is a lifelong and deeply ingrained practice and something people are reluctant to cut.”

Deb McVittie, owner of 32 Books Co. with stores in North Vancouver and on Hornby Island, says that in her store, “both books and cards seem to be recession-proof.” “But,” she qualifies that

# TO READ

by saying, “people are being pickier; they want to make the purchase, but they want their money to be well-spent.”

## Which Genres Are Growing?

Being more selective seems to mean taking fewer chances. Customers are less

likely to ‘sample,’ and instead have specific expectations. The common theme in categories where sales are increasing seems to be the chance to escape today’s harsh realities. Readers are choosing to lose themselves in another time, another’s love or even a whole new world. The Camps, along with most booksellers, have been very pleased with mega sales of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, and are enjoying the side benefit of so many young people coming into the store. Science fiction and fantasy sales are up, as is romance. Harlequin reported fourth-quarter earnings up 32 per cent over the same period a year earlier, and Liate Stehlik,

publisher of Avon and William Morrow, imprints of HarperCollins Publishers, says in a *New York Times* interview, “Romance readers are the most loyal fans, sticking to a series or an author once they have grown attached to one. It’s a very dedicated audience who doesn’t see it as a luxury as much as a neces-

consumerism and looking for ways to reconnect. Inspirational books speak to creativity; being creative in our personal and business lives.”

## What is Motivating Book Buyers?

Bookstore clientele are treating themselves to escapes into good reads, as well as searching out books that offer practical guidance about how to spend our time and how to understand our inner selves. “Books can confirm for us what’s needed in our lives,” says McVittie. And when bookstore customers venture back to the challenges of everyday life, it seems to be with a renewed appreciation for the value their communities add to their lives. As a result, booksellers are noting a greater commitment from customers to their local independent bookstore and regional authors. At The Bookshelf in

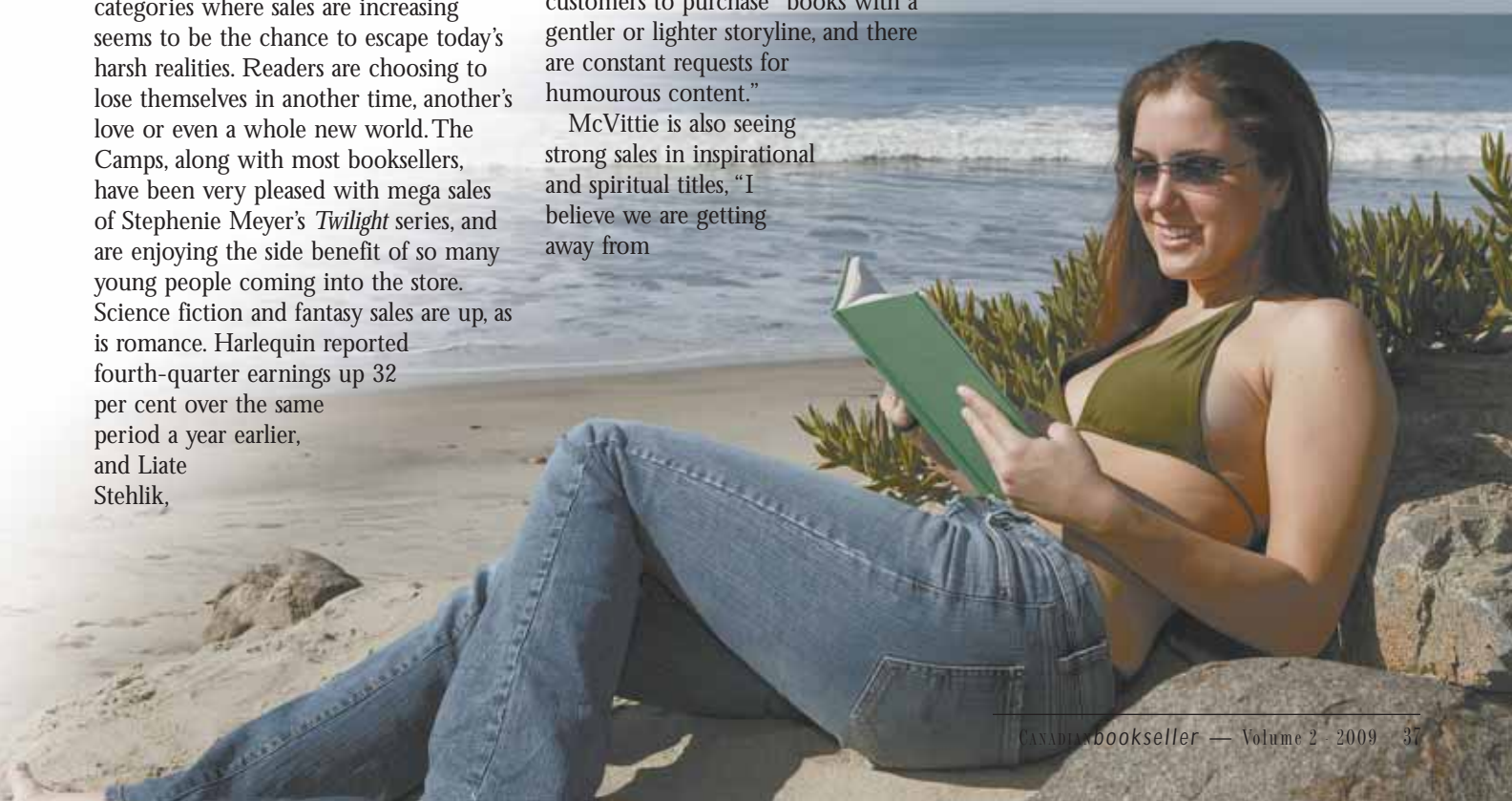
McVittie is also seeing strong sales in inspirational and spiritual titles, “I believe we are getting away from consumerism and looking for ways to reconnect. Inspirational books speak to creativity; being creative in our personal and business lives.”

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sity.” According to McVittie careful selection and discrimination are leading her customers to purchase “books with a gentler or lighter storyline, and there are constant requests for humorous content.”

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Guelph, ON, co-owner Barb Minett has seen this increased appreciation and support for her store's role in the community and a growth in attendance at her bookshop events. McVittie has also found "people are making a conscious

are up considerably." This is largely due to an increased commitment from school boards to local bookstores, from provincial funding for school libraries.

### Surviving the Recession?

"I realize that business must be managed very carefully to survive in economically

At The Bookshelf in Guelph, ON, co-owner Barb Minett has seen this increased appreciation and support for her store's role in the community and a growth in attendance at her bookshop events.

decision to support writers and poets." She offers the example of a May poetry reading from David Zieroth's new collection, *The Fly in Autumn* (Harbour Publishing). Rather than the sparse audience that a poetry

reading typically attracts, without much advertising, 32 Books Co. found itself hosting a crowd of 50. She ponders, "Poetry is perhaps the least accessed by the average person, but it allows us to connect. In times of trouble, we want to connect." Brooks has also found the community engaging more with her bookshop, including more frequent requests for book displays from local schools. And, she adds, "Since CBA worked on behalf of independent bookseller members to get us included on the qualified vendors list, sales for the first quarter of 2009

difficult times," says Brooks. "And I believe that booksellers need to focus on being an asset to their communities." To do this Brooks reminds booksellers that it is essential to be a community hub: An information and entertainment centre, a place for people to network, and a practical resource (e.g. a box office for local cultural venues). She adds, "I think we also need to keep informing people about our value and making people aware of the benefits to the community of supporting local businesses."

Strong first quarter sales offer us food for thought. Michael Tamblyn opines, "For the time being, Canadians continue to view books as a staple, not a luxury." Likewise, cautious optimism seems to be the feeling amongst booksellers. Whether bookstore owners view books as an inexpensive accessory to complement their clientele's stycations or believe their customers truly value the book as sustenance for the soul, booksellers feel that they will sustain sales through this recession. Just as *Gone with the Wind* offered inspiration and escape, booksellers are hopeful that today's book buyers will continue to view books as essential to nourish our spirits and feed our imaginations, and so let's hope bookstore customers are as determined as Scarlett O'Hara to "never be hungry again."

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