

Bow to Community

DO ME A FAVOUR. Take a notebook and pencil to the nearest specialty bookstore. When you arrive, take note of how these specialists talk about books. They're more literate about what they sell than most university professors. By that, I mean that they can talk with enthusiasm about books with casual readers. They don't "deconstruct" (i.e., "destruct") the books so many readers love. And they don't suffer to talk to fans of the genre because they're fans too.

Me, I'll visit the Sleuth of Baker Street, a top tier mystery shop in the Leaside neighbourhood of Toronto. This bookstore is the place in the area if you're a mystery fan. The booksellers at the Sleuth know what's current, they know the classics, and they know that book, you know the one where there's that guy who falls in love with that girl and then he ends up dead? You know which one I mean, right? And the Sleuth keeps, it seems, almost every mystery novel ever published on their shelves. It is the Library of Babel, if you like noir. The choice is endless and the Sleuth's booksellers keep you from getting lost.

This issue of *Canadian Bookseller* examines niche bookselling. We could have profiled many more specialists in our feature than we have. Booksellers in cultural niches and the many stores selling mysteries and fantasies all deserve attention, and we'll give them attention in coming issues. The limited sample we have in this issue is enough to illustrate what's happening to specialists in 2011. If the genre's hot, as is children's literature, sales catch fire. If God is dead, so is the store, as we see with some religious book retailers.

Constant in niche bookselling is adaptation and diversification. As Chris Szego, owner of SF bookstore Bakka-Phoenix writes in an op-ed on niche bookselling (p. 20), specialists survive by adapting to the rapid changes in the communities they serve. "Community is elastic," Szego writes, "so we do our best to be flexible." This is a line to put above the mantel—or better, above the cash register.

The key word is "community." The fact is that all independent booksellers are specialty booksellers. If they're not genre specialists, they're neighbourhood specialists. Black Bond Books, an independent with 11 stores in B.C., has found longevity by knowing what makes neighbourhoods distinct. So does Book City in Toronto. They know the community inside the store—they know their die-hard regulars. And they know the community outside the store well enough to get those people through their doors.

And the other key word: "flexibility." Genres change. Neighbourhoods change. Consumers change. It's a truism to say booksellers change but many don't—and won't. But they do need to remain flexible. Flexibility and change are not the same things. Change means to become something different. Flexibility means to bend but not to break. The difference is important. Independent booksellers don't want to change into something they're not—but they don't want to break. The survivors bend to the community. They bow.

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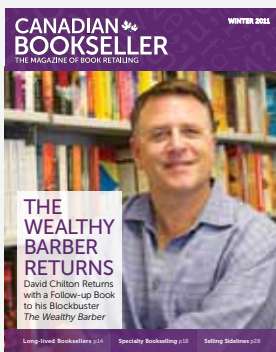
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ABOUT THE COVER

The Wealthy Barber Returns: Significantly Older and Marginally Wiser. In 1989, author David Chilton released *The Wealthy Barber*. It went on to sell an astonishing two million copies in Canada. Over the years, Dave also published the bestselling cookbooks *Looneyspoons*, *Crazy Plates and Eat, Shrink & Be Merry!* along with authors Janet and Greta Podleski. Dave tries to mix humour and common sense to help people handle their money more wisely. A frequent guest on national TV and radio shows, and a much sought-after speaker, Dave lives just outside Waterloo, Ontario.

Photo by Ian Wilms