

Turn and Face the Strange

BY MARK LEFEBVRE

"And these children that you spit on as they try to change their worlds are immune to your consultations; they're quite aware of what they're going through."

– David Bowie, *Changes*

MOST OF THE PEOPLE drawn to bookselling are passionate about books, passionate about reading, passionate about being engaged in retailing a product that transforms lives. Having been in bookselling for two decades, I've often told people that I don't see myself as a retailer or a salesperson. Frankly, I've never been good at selling things. But that all changes when I'm selling something I believe will positively change a customer.

When I place the right book into a customer's hand, it is no longer a simple business transaction. It is a relationship built upon trust; it is an exchange of ideas. And when you get it right, there's an intense satisfaction; a reward that is difficult to describe but which most booksellers know and love.

"Booksellers must remain open to all the possibilities that build on their role as purveyors of culture, leisure, and history."

More and more these days, customers enter bookstores not just to discover books, but to discover related cultural artifacts. And many booksellers have discovered the joys of aligning books with complementary merchandise. It might be merging a coffee shop with the bookstore, or carrying a selection of art, music or stationery supplies. It might be offering greeting cards, carrying remainders, offering items that appeal to those interested in crafts. It could be newspapers and magazines, or posters and specially branded t-shirts. Soon it will be ebooks. (Although ebooks aren't sidelines; rather, they are another type of book, the same way that mass market, trade paperback and audio books, although relatively new in the "book" world, have become an expected part of a customer's choice.)

In 2008, we at Titles Bookstore at McMaster invested in an Espresso Book Machine. The EBM did not inspire a new product line, because the product it serves up is still a book. But along with the access to "fast serve" special orders, the EBM also introduced a new source of revenue by allowing self-published authors an easy way to get their book published in a real bricks-and-mortar bookstore. The EBM is another sideline business that works well for bookstores across Canada and around the world.

One of the other sidelines that fits nicely with books is something we introduced shortly after learning about it from colleagues at this summer's CBA National Conference. Robin Tancredi, General Books Buyer at Titles Bookstore, had long carried various items from The Unemployed Philosopher's Guild—they create book-themed coffee mugs, umbrellas, journals and other items. But a colleague at the CBA conference suggested that Robin try out their line of finger puppets.



Robin hesitantly tried it, ordering in real-life figures such as Freud, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Shakespeare, some literary figures like Hamlet and Sherlock Holmes, as well as novelty "characters" such as Schrodinger's Cat or Pavlov's Dog. It seems strange for a campus bookstore to order this kind of merchandise. One can imagine academics looking down their noses at these "toys." But the truth is, we couldn't keep these on the shelves. We re-ordered them constantly. And they didn't just sell. They got customers talking and bringing their friends into the store to check them out.

As bookstores evolve, it's important for booksellers to continue to embrace the book, the thing that first drew them to bookselling. But just as crucially, booksellers must remain open to all the possibilities that build on their role as purveyors of culture, leisure, and history.

The question to ask ourselves when considering the endless possibilities is: What sideline items effectively complement our stores, our staff, our locations and our customers?

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