

THRIVING IN THE CORNERS

**NICHE BOOKSELLERS CHAMPION
INDEPENDENT BOOKSELLING BY
SPECIALIZING IN WHAT THEY
KNOW BEST**

ALL INDEPENDENT BOOKSELLERS specialize in some way, whether they specialize in understanding their neighbourhoods or in stocking and selling particular kinds of books. In that respect, independent booksellers may see their salvation in digging into a speciality and doing it better than anybody else. In this feature, we sample the work of speciality retailers in five niches, outline their strategy for success, and identify the challenges they face.

Feeling the Good Vibes

DIVERSIFICATION AND SIDELINES ADD TO THE METAPHYSICIAN'S BOTTOM LINE

BY JOY FERGUSON

IT IS THE DAWNING of the Age of Aquarius. The Waterbearer's finer qualities—innovative, curious, social—describe well how New Age booksellers have thrived in today's competitive marketplace.

Regina's Aware House Books opened in 1976 when a demand for transpersonal books became apparent. Its original sideline—100 per cent cotton blouses—suited the counter-culture demographic that recognized the store as a gathering place. Bonnie Castonguay, co-owner of Aware House, says her store's greatest challenge is not ethereal. It is the real-world hurdle faced by today's independent booksellers: big box retailing.

But, Castonguay proudly states, "We survived Chapters." Although not without a 25 per cent drop in book sales. Still, with knowledgeable staff, careful business management, and transcendent customer service, sales figures have once again levitated.

Castonguay identifies good business practices as a main reason for Aware House's strong bottom line. "My husband, Guy, a truly excellent book buyer, also wisely increased the variety of New Age music and giftware." She relies on management tools. "Bookmanager and Pubstock are crucial to the success of our business." And she cautions booksellers to "really keep your eye on the cash flow. Always, always, keep the stock levels up and only spend your profit, not your investment."

PJ Clarke, owner of Ottawa's Serendipity Books & Gifts since 2002, has adapted to this market through a well-considered shift to sidelines. "Educating my community is my priority, but I have to watch

my bottom line. Increasing merchandise, such as crystals, allows me to offer practical tools to aid my customers, while increasing my profit margins."

Both Castonguay and Clarke have so effectively connected with their communities that they do not require large advertising budgets. Neither sells online, but both appreciate their websites as valuable marketing tools. "I want my store—not cyberspace—to be a gathering place where the community can explore and learn," says Clarke. Clarke originally offered brief introductions to various metaphysical topics, but this has evolved into today's busy schedule of workshops, speakers, and demonstrations.

And if they gather, do they shop? Castonguay says they do. "Since opening, we have twice the number of book titles. And in the last ten years, our gross sales have doubled." Aware House maintains 50-50 split between books and gift items. Current trends include crystals, and meditation and stress-reduction materials. Originally, they had intended to sell only books, "but not only does everything else pay the bills, now we offer a 'complete package' for people's spiritual materialism."

Castonguay's clientele is diverse. "We are connected to a huge community of doctors, yoga teachers, university professors, etc. who send their patients, clients and students to us." She adds: "When I took up meditation and a vegetarian lifestyle 35 years ago, people did not accept me very well. Today mainstream doctors recommend these to their patients. It is a very different world." Clearly, it is a new age. 📖

CHILDREN'S BOOKSTORES

Specializing in Storytelling

CHILDREN'S BOOKSELLERS INSPIRE READING

BY STEPHANIE QUINLAN

"**CHILDREN'S BOOKSELLING** is a fun genre to be in," says Garry O'Connell from Fundamental Books and Toys in Stratford. "It allows us to focus our expertise and that, in turn, allows us to be competitive."

The benefits arising from that ability to focus are echoed by other booksellers and distributors. Bobbie Turner from CanLit for Kids says her business is so focused that she and her colleagues can be considered experts. Suzanne Brooks from Gulliver's Quality Books and Toys remarks that, "We get known as a resource. Being a specialist allows you to do a better job."


Some booksellers specialize even further. Doreen Chiu runs YouAreSpecial.com, an online store that sells bilingual children's books in more than 50 languages. "Families want to maintain their home language, culture and background," she says. "Parents and grandparents like to read to their kids in their native language, and they're excited by the availability of dual language books."

Today's kids are tempted by an ever-increasing array of gadgets, and one wonders whether books can compete. One thing that all children's booksellers agree on is that if the parents read, the kids will read. Teachers and librarians play an important role too. "I've seen a librarian put the right book in a kid's hand and just ignite that spark," says Bobbie. "We write teacher notes to go with the books and we include links to book trailers."

Will banning electronic gadgets create

readers? Heather Kuipers from Ella Minnow says that books and gadgets are both tools and that it's not a good idea to get lost in either medium, while Wendy Van Barneveld from Whirlybird Books suggests that, "video games are just another form of storytelling. Promoting literacy for boys is huge, and parents are starting to accept that it's OK for them to read magazines and graphic novels." She emphasizes that reading should be fun and engaging, and not treated like a chore.

So what inspires kids to read these days? What topics are they drawn to? "Kids want to start knowing who they are going to become sooner," says Kuipers. "Reading books lets them try on different personalities and practice in their minds what they might do in real life." Another topic that booksellers agree on is that kids and young adults like a good series. Brooks and O'Connell both find that kids like the continuity of a series and Kuipers observes that "kids like book series because they find it stressful to commit to a new book and they like finding a character that they want to spend time with."

Van Barneveld has her store set up in a way that encourages kids to widen their reading horizons. "The books are organized by genre, like a library or a video store, and not by age," she explains. "When was the last time you went a book store and asked for the 28-year-old section, for example? Adults don't shop like that, so why should kids?" 

COMMENTARY

"Community is elastic, so we do our best to be flexible"

BY CHRIS SZEGO

AS THE MANAGER of Bakka Phoenix Books, Canada's oldest SF bookstore, I've spent the last 12 years immersed in the world of niche bookselling. Those 12 years mark me as a relative newbie to my genre. We have customers who were store regulars long before I appeared on the scene. We have customers who were regulars before I could read. Their depth of knowledge is a resource, a challenge, and a comfort. It also forms the core of what can only be described as a community—complete with all the friendships, loyalties, and occasional politicking that entails.

More than anything else, community is what I want Bakka Phoenix to offer: a safe place for our customers to find the books, company, and conversation they want most. Late last

In With The Old

FLOODED WITH SUPPLY, USED BOOKSELLERS UP THE QUALITY OF THEIR STOCK

BY ROBERT PRICE

THE VAN pulls into the parking lot and the white haired man hefts a box of books into the store. "I've got some great books and I'll sell them cheap," he tells the store owner. Like other Baby Boomers, he's liquidating his library to save space, or because he's switched to e-reading. He smiles at the woman behind the counter. She smiles back, sifts through the books, and closes the box without buying anything. "Try another store," she says.

This is a daily scene at H. Sommers Books. The store's owner Teresa Sommers Fulton says she's buying and selling all day. With the huge volume of used books on the market, she can afford to be selective about what she buys. "I am not a junk yard," she says.

Debra Levy, owner and operator of The Reading Room, saw the glut hit the streets after Christmas last year, when e-readers went mainstream. The upside of the glut is that she now has access to the cream of the used book crop. "I've upped my quality standards of what I buy and I'm not paying as much for books as I used to," says Levy.

The flood of books on the market really is a flood. Scott Wicken, co-owner of Old Goat Books, says the number of mediocre, unsellable books significantly outnumbers the jewels. With fewer used bookstores operating than 10 years ago, he's bombarded by so much slush that he needs more staff

just to wade through the selection. Like Levy, Wicken has raised his purchasing standards. The future of used bookselling, he says, lies in the quality of the stock. "Book buying will become more of a collector's mentality than it already is," says Wicken.

To deal with the flood of books washing through her front door, Jayne Wyatt, owner of The Book Bazaar, doesn't pay for books any more. Now, she offers store credit for the books she wants to acquire. And she only takes about five per cent of what comes through her door.

Wyatt believes there is a strong future in used bookselling. She sees used bookselling as somewhere in the middle of a sea change—and not necessarily a change for the worse. "I'm optimistic," Wyatt says. "This business is viable." The impediments for her business have nothing to do with finding readers or moving stock. What's killing her are skyrocketing city taxes—"It's just shameful," she says—and constant road construction outside her store.

Physical books won't go away. There will always exist readers who want the book, who want to search used stores for elusive treasures, read their finds cover to cover, and build personal libraries. For these readers, the book is a part of their life, says Sommers Fulton. "A book is a trophy," she says. "It's an achievement." 📖

winter we moved into a new location to better help us achieve our aims. Now we have ample activity space in which to host book clubs, writers groups, and classes. And that's in addition to our many author events (though it's possible to do too many events: once we did twenty-one events in thirty-five days. I do NOT recommend it). The results are impressive. Despite a complicated move, ongoing contractor issues, and a sad lack of air-conditioning (see: contractor issues), we had a strong summer and are beginning a truly excellent fall.

Our customers know their stuff, and they truly love what they love. We have to match that love or risk being completely ineffective. It makes staffing tricky. I can teach any competent person to use the cash register but I can't teach thirty years of reading. Employees have to bring their own expertise, and then expand it. We need to know the SF genre in all its forms so that we can make effective recommendations. Even more importantly, we need to know our customers. We need to know their tastes, their regular favourites, and their wild one-offs. So we ask them what they watch, what they listen to, and often what they don't like. We try to find out to who they are. Because "they" are changing all the time. >PAGE 23

RELIGIOUS BOOKSTORES

Doing Good Business

RELIGIOUS BOOKSTORES WEATHER A CRISIS IN FAITH

BY JOY FERGUSON

RELIGIOUS BOOKSELLERS face assault by the same Goliaths that challenge all independents, but they are also troubled by a market diminished as people question the relevance of traditional religion.

At Grand River Spiritual and Educational Resources, located in the Five Oaks Centre, in Paris, Ontario, Director Jackie Childerhose explains: "Our market is shrinking as Progressive Christians leave our traditional institutions." Childerhose had sold through events at Five Oaks, an education centre with the United Church of Canada and other faith communities. But, he says, "As numbers in our religious community decline, this impacts attendance. Lower attendance makes fees for high profile presenters prohibitive, and so planning certain events, which might generate a high volume of book sales, is not possible." To counter the blow, Five Oaks is designing educational programming to positively impact Grand River's sales.

Since the bookstore's opening in 2000, Childerhose has expanded inventory to include children's books, church supplies and gifts. "In addition, we carry Fair Trade products [coffee, tea, hot chocolate and chocolate bars] since we view this as an added service for our niche—and not unhelpful to our bottom line." To increase sales and reach a new audience, Childerhose plans to launch an online store. "We hope to 'reconnect' with our customers who seek well-chosen titles to enhance their human experiences, and 'connect' with a market that seeks to learn of expressions of spirituality and faith in a secular world."

At Israel's Judaica, owner Susie Kaplan knows her website is a valuable tool. She upgrades the site regularly and offers attractive discounts to her customers. She seeks out unique sidelines, and sells them through her online store. "The key to our business is to continually look for new and interesting products." She adds that a niche bookseller's knowledge of her specialty is "essential and that is where generic bookstores cannot compete."

When the first location opened in Toronto in 1982, Israel's Judaica sold books and some religious gifts. Twenty-nine years later, Kaplan has two locations. Jewish books, gifts and ritual items have seen sublime sales over the years, and Kaplan has profitably added sidelines including toys, games and jewellery. Offering a mail order service to complement storefront and Internet sales has further opened both the national and international marketplace. Kaplan has built strong relationships, and now sells directly to synagogues and small gifts shops, as well as providing a specialized book service to the educational community.

At times, the odds may seem against religious booksellers, but by bravely standing their ground, with faith in their resourcefulness, and creative marketing tools and strategies, they believe they will win the day. As Kaplan says, "To open a specialty bookstore requires devotion and ingenuity. It is a cyclical business and it can be physically and emotionally challenging. Where others are preparing for holidays, we are working long hours at the store. But it is very rewarding and can be very profitable." ■

◀PAGE 21 When I started, SF was the still the one genre in which male customers noticeably outnumbered females. That's not true anymore. Major entertainment trends like Harry Potter, the Lord of the Rings movies, and the recent Game of Thrones TV series has evened the gender imbalance, and broadened the reach of SF considerably. Which is good; the more exposure, the better. Just so long as we don't reach for the new at the expense of our long-standing patrons.

And speaking of new: ebooks. SF readers are technologically adept early adopters. They love gadgets. The newer, the better. They also love books, both physical and electronic. Ebooks are not the boogeyman, and they aren't the saviour of publishing; they're simply a new format for a familiar product. What we need to do is find a way to incorporate this new format into our current business model. Thankfully, some very smart people are working on solutions for doing so. We're too small a business to take on this task alone, so we very much look forward to hearing and implementing CBA's suggestions. ▶PAGE 24

ANTIQUARIAN BOOKSELLERS

Search for the Rare Treasure Pays Off

ANTIQUARIAN BOOKSELLERS SURVIVE BY ADAPTING

BY JOY FERGUSON

FOR COLLECTORS, antiquarian bookshops are treasure troves. Romantic and enchanting, this specialty conjures images of 19th-century adventurers as they romp through the Queen-dome from auction house to estate sale in search of first editions. But business is not care-free for today's rare book dealers. Their most daunting challenge is Internet competition.


Steven Temple Books successfully overcame this obstacle with an if-you-can-do-it-I-can-do-it-better approach. Temple's Toronto store opened in 1974 as a general used bookstore, evolving into a fine and rare bookshop as his knowledge—and capital—grew. Today, he offers 50,000 rare editions. Temple explains that an antiquarian bookseller requires hands-on experience and the accumulation of knowledge so "one can recognize uncommon books lost in a sea of general titles." Careful selection is essential, including estimating the resale price and identifying a potential customer. Temple is unequivocal about the impact of Amazon's Internet sales on his business. "Ten years ago, their online store emptied my shop." But Temple was equally certain in meeting the challenge. He established his own online store, mastering the sales medium with sell-through of more than 50 per cent of everything listed in the last decade. "Internet buying and selling lets me use my imagination to seek out books to suit my customers." With the success of online sales, Temple plans to close his storefront.


Liam McGahern, co-owner of Patrick McGahern Books, Inc. in Ottawa, has, instead, diversified sales channels, "expanding and

adapting to survive." Shortly after opening in 1969, the store began a transition from used books to collectible tomes. In time, McGahern recognized an opportunity in catalogue sales. Today, McGahern's offers thousands of rare books through catalogues published six times annually in print and digital download. To complement the storefront and catalogue sales, his online store features 10,000 titles through its online database.

This year, McGahern's has again adapted, launching McGahern Stewart Publishing, which specializes in out-of-print accounts of northern travel. As well, McGahern's moved and has ceased selling used books in its new location. "The used book business has always been tough and is getting tougher, with so many avenues to buy cheap used books." McGahern closed his traditional storefront to move to a busier neighbourhood—Byward Market—and up to the third floor. "In this new location, we are easily accessible to those searching for rare books." McGahern has no need to advertise: "My customers are always on the hunt and will seek us out."

McGahern is optimistic but laments that the antiquarian book market has diminished. "If you want a rare book—not as a collectible, but for its content—you have options thanks to the Internet and print-on-demand. But for those who love rare books, the world is changing and we are adapting."

Even though today's antiquarian booksellers hunt in cyberspace, McGahern still treasures his finds: "As a renowned antiquarian bookseller once said, 'We get to own the books of kings...if only for a short time.'" 

◀PAGE 23 That being said, we're not complete techno-morons. We've had a chatty, conversational blog for years, which now cross-posts to our FaceBook page. We also recently revamped our website to make it both more functional and more interactive. Now we can let everyone know what know what new books have arrived, contribute to several bestseller lists, and maintain contact with readers all around the world. Community is elastic, so we do our best to be flexible. 

Chris Szego is owner of Bakka Phoenix Books.