

RETURN
OF THE
GREAT
AMERICAN
INDIE
BOOKSTORE

*By
David
Hale
Smith*

The demise
of the
**neighborhood
readers'
paradise** has
been greatly
exaggerated.



I

AM STANDING IN A SLOW-MOVING line of people in a small New York City bookstore, queued just behind multimillion-copy-selling author Lee Child (creator of the Jack Reacher thriller series). On another night, Child would be

the main draw in a store like this, but we are both customers today, chatting about the books we are reading. We are waiting to say hello and get an autograph from author Reed Farrel Coleman, who is signing copies of his new book, *Robert B. Parker's Blind Spot*, recently published by Putnam Adult. We are drinking complimentary Ballantine IPA beers, cradled in the



Lee Child, author of the Jack Reacher novels, is a proponent of indie book-sellers.

warm Tribeca location of The Mysterious Bookshop, a narrow 1800 square feet of heaven on earth for mystery and thriller lovers. This is the kind of intimate experience you can expect to have on a normal night at an indie bookshop.

Such experiences may seem rare, but they are increasingly available to everyone, as American independent bookstores are thriving in many cities around the country. In fact, rumors of their demise in the age of Amazon.com and e-books are greatly exaggerated. We still love reading “real” books — that is to say, physical, printed editions. A new survey of U.S. book-buying behavior by Nielsen Books & Consumer shows that both hardcover and paperback print books

significantly outsold e-books in the first half of 2014. A 2013 American Booksellers Association report confirmed sales at indie bookstores were on the rise.

These numbers support what my gut tells me is true. Bookstores are still wondrous, magical little places. There is something special about the community that gathers in and around a great local bookstore. Browsing their aisles is an invigorating experience; the brain fires up at the riot of colorful book jackets, the earthy smell of quality paper and the promise of future hours well spent, tucked away inside your mind. Here are a few of my favorite indie bookstores that offer just such a promise:

THE MYSTERIOUS BOOKSHOP

New York

www.mysteriousbookshop.com

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REAT BOOKSTORES ARE NOT only about self-involvement, though. A great bookstore is communal, their owners reservoirs of knowledge. If you are lucky enough to find avuncular owner Otto Penzler in his Mysterious Bookshop, for example, be sure to ask for a recommendation about what he's reading from his private stash. Penzler is this country's most experienced, most connected and



A great bookstore is communal, their owners reservoirs of knowledge.

most knowledgeable mystery bookseller and collector. A recent *New York Times* story about him estimated his personal library of books at over 50,000 volumes.

The oldest dedicated mystery-genre bookstore in America, The Mysterious Bookshop was opened by Penzler in 1979 on West 56th Street in Midtown Manhattan and then relocated to its current downtown location on Warren Street nearly 10 years ago. The store is just a





few minutes' walk from New York City Hall, the Manhattan end of the Brooklyn Bridge and the new Freedom Tower. As you'd expect, Mysterious carries a deep selection in the mystery, thriller and suspense categories, with an always-full stock of new hardcovers, paperbacks and mystery-related periodicals. They also feature a collection of signed first editions, as well as rare and collectable books. Fans of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* will be delighted to know that most of an entire wall of shelves is dedicated to the legendary author's series. From original first editions to scholarly works, Mysterious orders every new item related to the world of "Sherlockiana." The store celebrates the great detective's birthday with an open house, and they even have a monthly newsletter to keep customers up to date about their various book clubs, new book releases, in-store events and recently acquired rare books.

TOP: COURTESY OF MYSTERIOUS BOOKS, BOTTOM: SALLY ANSCOMBE/GETTY IMAGES



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POWELL'S CITY OF BOOKS

Portland, Oregon (flagship location)
www.powells.com

FROM ITS HUMBLE BEGINNINGS in 1971 on a city street corner in northwest Portland, Oregon, Powell's Books has grown into one of the world's biggest bookstores. It not only has five locations in the Portland area, it also serves customers worldwide as one of the book world's most successful online retailers.

Powell's roots trace to Chicago. As a University of Chicago graduate student, Michael Powell opened his first bookstore in the Windy City in 1970. Encouraged by friends and professors (including novelist Saul Bellow, according to store lore), Powell borrowed \$3,000 to assume a lease on a used bookstore. Powell repaid the loan within two months. The business made its way to Portland after Powell's father, Walter, worked in the Chicago store. The elder Powell enjoyed the experience so much that upon returning to Portland he decided to open his own used bookstore. He quickly acquired so much used inventory that he moved the entire operation into a former car dealership. That location has undergone many transformations as Powell's flagship store, and at 68,000 square feet,

COURTESY OF BOOKS & BOOKS (2)

BOOKS & BOOKS

Coral Gables, Florida
www.booksandbooks.com

MY FAVORITE BOOKS & BOOKS store is the flagship in Coral Gables. (There are four locations in the Miami area.) Founded by Mitchell Kaplan in 1982, this is one of the finest and most important independent bookstores in the country. A gathering place for authors and artists, the store is a Florida landmark. The historic 1927 Mediterranean-style building is 9,000 square feet with original tile floors, a fireplace, high-beamed ceilings and floor-to-ceiling wooden bookshelves.

The philosophy at Books & Books, Kaplan says, "is about neighbors, books, history, quality, tradition and creativity." Mitch Kaplan and his store are powerful forces in American independent bookselling. Kaplan is even known in the industry as a "big mouth,"

a complimentary term, meaning that good word-of-mouth from him and his staff is something that major book publishers rely on to generate buzz and enthusiastic support when they are debuting their new big books. Kaplan is a co-founder of the Miami Book Fair International and former president of the American Booksellers Association, the

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Mitch Kaplan and his store are powerful forces in American independent bookselling.

nonprofit trade organization for independently owned bookstores. They even have an old-school proper newsstand in the breezeway that features a huge selection of national and international magazines and newspapers in multiple languages. Guests are encouraged to sit and enjoy the almost-always-perfect South Florida weather in the outdoor courtyard with umbrella-covered tables while enjoying a coffee from their cafe. Books & Books also welcomes a regular rotation of local, national and international writers as part of its award-winning "Reading Series."





it is a “city of books,” packed wall to wall and floor to ceiling with new and used books. Color-coded rooms house more than 3,500 different sections, including an immense selection of out-of-print, older and difficult-to-find books. Powell’s buys between 3,000 and 5,000 used books over the counter every day and stocks more than one million volumes on its shelves.

Powell’s is an online-retailing pioneer as well. It began selling books via the Internet in 1994. Within two years, its entire inventory, new and used, was tagged and available online. *The Washington Post* called Powell’s “perhaps the best bookstore in the world,” not least of all because Powell’s is staffed by experienced and dedicated book lovers who know the store like home. They can walk you directly to a book you’re after – while making actual recommendations of other good books along the way.

COURTESY OF POWELL'S (2)



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LITERATI BOOKSTORE
Ann Arbor, Michigan
www.literatibookstore.com

THERE IS A NEW GENERATION of indie booksellers rising in the wake of these booming larger independent stores.

Literati Bookstore opened in 2013 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, home of the former Borders bookstore chain. Michigan natives and young married couple Hilary and Michael Gustafson moved back to their home state from Brooklyn, New York to open the store. Their goal was to create a general-interest bookstore in the heart of walkable downtown Ann Arbor. Since opening, they have drawn happy customers into their renovated urban space with carefully curated inventory bolstered by a lineup of high-profile authors such as David Sedaris, Chris Van Allsburg of *Polar Express* and *Jumanji* fame, and Roxane Gay, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Bad Feminist*. On their driving vision for opening a bookstore, Literati owner Hilary says, “We felt it was our duty to the community of Ann Arbor, to the authors and to the book-publishing community to build a

great little store where people could physically connect with all these wonderful books.” Hilary says there has been nothing but pleasant surprises since they opened their doors. “The most rewarding thing is helping people discover great books. It is so fun to see total strangers talking to each other about the books in our store and recommending their favorites to one another.”



It also helps to locate your store within a literate and engaged community; poetry is their second best-selling section.

Hilary and Michael created original store programming from day one. Literati hosts regular events such as Poetry at Literati, a weekly Childrens’ Story Time hour and the Literati Feminist Book Club. It also helps to locate your store within a literate and engaged community; poetry is their sec-

ond best-selling section. But the young retail entrepreneurs aren’t just counting on walk-in traffic. They are always experimenting, even partnering with local restaurants and bars to host off-site special events. They recently held an event called The Ravens Club Book Club. Literati recently partnered with local restaurant The Ravens Club to have a dinner book club: an evening of eating, drinking, and discussing *The Complete Nose to Tail Cookbook* by Ferrus Henderson. The purchase of the book secured a reservation to the event. The chef even created a featured dish inspired by the book as a special menu item for all book-club participants. And a final tip for first-time visitors: Step right up to the manual “public typewriter” that is set up in the center of the store. Customers are encouraged to type notes, write their own flash fiction or leave messages behind. The store collects and posts the best typewritten notes on their Facebook page and Twitter feed. **continued on pg. 83**

THE WILD DETECTIVES

Dallas
www.thewilddetectives.com

THE NEWEST KID ON THE indie-bookstore block is The Wild Detectives in Dallas.

This home-sized store opened in early 2014 and offers European-style coffee service, six local craft beers on tap and an eclectic menu that includes breakfast tacos, fresh sandwiches and a legit selection of good wine and Spanish cheeses. A recent book signing for local author Merritt Tierce was like a literary salon. The small ochre house in the Bishop Arts neighborhood of Oak Cliff was packed to standing room only with writers, journalists and patrons drinking, cheering and trading jokes with the author as she read from her debut novel, *Love Me Back*.

Neophyte store owners Paco Vique and Javier Garcia del Moral decided they wanted an intimate bookstore in their adopted hometown that was like the places where they used to hang out in their native Spain. They had no experience operating a bookstore, so they leased a cool space and hired people who did have the experience to run the shop. Veteran bookseller Carlos Guajardo is the store manager, who is quick with a smile and a great book recommendation.



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While it is a very user-friendly store, you will not find your average airport best-sellers here.

He says, “We were pleasantly surprised by how responsive our customers have been to our selection of books, because we consciously chose to stock more un-

derrepresented authors. Right from the start, we began doing very strong book sales, hand in hand with strong sales of our great food and drinks.”

The interior, with exposed brick and repurposed-wood, is a study in everything-in-its-place curation. The book selection is tightly edited to entice and surprise; while it is a very user-friendly store, you will not find your average airport best-sellers here. The inventory ranges from international literary fiction to paperback short-story collections to an English translation of a best-selling Dutch novel to a luxe photography book featuring items made in the U.S. by American craftsmen. Wild Detectives draws a diverse and relaxed crowd to its regular events that include author readings, actor-driven performances of “Shakespeare at the Bar” and weekly live music played on the back porch. The store is an instant classic.

DAVID HALE SMITH spends a lot of time in bookstores. He is a literary agent and the editor of *Dallas Noir*, an anthology of short fiction published in 2013 by Akashic Books.

