

Not in Chains

Bookseller Doug McLean on how independent bookshops survive and, despite the odds, thrive

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The corduroy-clad bookseller sits quietly behind an eccentrically cluttered counter that bears a mug of Earl Grey, a plate of ginger biscuits and a curled, contented cat. An aroma of musty paper wafts from crammed and dusty

shelves.

That charming stereotype, if ever so, can no longer stand true. Today the modern independent is as informed in contemporary retailing as they are deep-rooted in their local communities. They are survivors. Many endured the demise of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) and now cope skilfully with the supermarket and high street price wars. Although they are fitter than ever before, in an ever-changing bookselling climate, are they fit enough for the future?

Shortly before the end of the 19th Century, booksellers threatened by cut-price selling of popular books from those intent on capturing the market for themselves, demanded a fair solution. Consequently, the terms of the NBA were drawn up and agreed by the Booksellers Association, the Society of Authors and the Publishers Association, and implemented on New Year's Day 1900. Thereafter, if a book was designated 'net' by a publisher, the bookseller received a discount, but had to sell it at the agreed price. The penalty for underselling was that the publisher refused to sell the offending bookseller any further stock.

The Net Book Agreement worked well. It created a level playing field and left competition to the publishers who could, and did, vie with each other on quality, or price, or both. Then in 1996, despite frantic resistance by the Booksellers Association and others, the NBA collapsed. There are several reasons why this happened, but the most powerful influence was the burgeoning USA-style book retail chains who used increasing power to bring about the Agreement's fall. Just as predicted, its collapse strengthened the bookshop chains. Also, just as predicted, it was the small independent bookshops that were most affected. In 2001, the Booksellers Association alarmingly reported that one in ten independent bookshops had folded since 1996. But recently they announced that in the past ten years the number of independents has fallen from 1,894 to 1,562. In other words, a further one in five independents were lost. In the same period, 'book outlets' which include chains and supermarkets have risen from 3,333 to 3,918.

The past decade has given witness to several take-overs and jostling for pecking order by companies

such as Ottaker, Waterstones, Borders, and others, let alone the amazing growth of Amazon. Meanwhile, hapless independents have looked on in trepidation, and many of those still remaining in the city high streets were soon targeted and disappeared. The safest independents were those in smaller country towns or city suburbs.

The modus operandi of aggressive corporate growth was easily learned. The big players need only copy techniques of the supermarket giants and their ways of forcing planning permission, dominating their suppliers, swallowing and spitting out local small businesses and selling to the public what *they* want to sell, cunningly disguised as consumer choice. But that's another issue

Once upon a time all booksellers eagerly looked forward to the big bestseller at Christmas. Alas, no more. Every number-one bestseller in recent years was taken up by supermarkets and big bookstore chains and sold at below the price that most independents can buy them for. Moreover, they are most likely sold for less than the retail giants paid for them themselves. Supermarkets are accountable for only 6% of total book sales, but they can be responsible for as much as 80% of sales of a bestseller.¹ It is now unlikely that a book would reach the bestseller lists without the support of the big supermarkets.

It is paradoxical, therefore, that actually book sales are increasing, but that is simply because cut-price bestsellers are shifting in pile-'em-high-sell-'em-cheap loads. But at what cost to literature? The bigger and more dominant the chains become, the fewer titles will be published. The impact on our national literature will be profound.

If this trend continues, the responsibility for what stocks the nation's bookshop shelves will be in the hands of a few Head Office buyers who, by nature, are far removed from the eventual customer. There will be little room for experiment with new authors, and small independent publishers, and the public will see but a fraction of the wide variety that existed when independent bookshops were plentiful.

Today the surviving independent is much different to that of a decade ago. They all have positive hopes because customers tell them their appeal and attraction is that they are *not* the high street chain bookstore and are a refreshing change from the over-marketed, identically stocked super-bookstores.

¹ Source: *Shopped: The Shocking Power of British Supermarkets*, Joanna Blythman, 4th Estate, 2004

Independents are not governed by corporate buying policies whereas chains have central buying offices that negotiate the best deals from publishers. In other words, they stock the shelves in all their branches with profit in mind. That in turn controls what the customer is offered. In their defence, high street rents are huge and therefore profit must be a prime consideration. But even the largest super-store can stock only a small fraction of books in print. This must concern many publishers, because a title may never find its way to the public eye on the high street unless the decision is made by the head office buyer.

Conversely, the independent bookseller's shelves are stocked according to local taste and also any special 'niche' that the independent may have. Many own their property, or are in secondary trading positions and do not have the pressure of high rents. It is also true that many have dedicated, skilled and intelligent staff who accept that rates of pay that are lower than they deserve are worth the pleasure of working in an environment that they love.

So, it is not all bad news. If more books are being sold, then more books are being read, which creates a nice trickle-down effect that independents can harness. The book-reading public is becoming more aware that independent bookshops are places where they can interact with the bookshop staff, who often know, or take the trouble to learn, their names and their favourite choices in reading. The independent, as second nature, holds knowledge of its customers that supermarkets and chains spend hundreds of thousands of pounds attempting to capture electronically. An assistant on the high street may look askance on an enquiry for a semi-obscure or specialised title not on their 'core stock' list, quickly lose interest (yes, it really happens) and tell the customer to 'try the publisher', whereas the independent will leave no stone unturned. They are also very good at spotting emerging literary talent and bestsellerdom has many titles that have risen up from the independent bookshop. They are able to make immediate commercial decisions whereas chains are bound by corporate policy. Also, a closer inspection of stocks on the high street may reveal that the majority of titles are the same price as at the independent. It is only a limited number of titles likely to be of Known Value to the customer that attract heavy discounting.

On a recent trip to Belfast, I discovered 'No Alibis', an independent bookshop with a niche specialism in crime (so to speak). Within minutes David Torrans, the owner, approached and offered coffee (freshly ground and excellent) and I was soon drawn into conversation with two other customers, also clutching steaming mugs. And the craic was good. Three quarters of an hour later, I left with my purchase.

So, the independent bookshop remains a fixture in places where they are strong and where discerning book-buyers seek them out. But what of the future? They may be safe for the time being, but not if the chains start to take further examples from the

supermarket giants. Just as Tesco and now Asda are turning to the domain of the little corner shop, the bookselling chains might look for greater domination by setting sights on independent bookshop territory. If this is ever allowed to happen then that may threaten the future of British literature as we know it.

The independent is successfully fighting its corner with the help of a growing number of allies. At last year's Cheltenham Festival of Literature, Alan Bennett, to enthusiastic applause, urged his 1,000 strong audience to boycott the high street book retail chains, to return to independent bookshops and appealed to book-buyers to protect towns and cities from 'Identikit' shopping centres. Book wholesaler Bertrams are soon to produce a give-away magazine *only* available to independents. The Booksellers Association are promoting the Independent Bookshop of the Year Award and significantly, the Office of Fair Trading have listened to the strong protests from authors and publishers and referred the controversial Waterstone/Ottaker proposed merger to the Competition Commission. Nevertheless, it is sad that the Booksellers Association Council – where incidentally Independent representation is much in the minority today - have adopted a 'neutral position' on this issue.

It would be naïve to hope for a return of the NBA – the opposition is far too powerful and self-interested. The independent will continue to survive because of what they do best. Nevertheless, they need more Alan Bennetts and others of influence to educate the public on the real cultural value of independent booksellers, not least as guardians of English literature.

The Arts Council, large publishers, independent publishers, authors, librarians, printers, educators, and indeed everybody else all have a vested interest in promoting the survival of the independent bookshop. Survival? Let's make that word revival.

Doug McLean owns an independent in Gloucestershire, The Forest Bookshop which he started in 1976.