



Bookseller breed – threatened species?

S. Berner

sberner@ecognus.com

My road to 'information as science' went through 'information as medium' long before I decided to tackle the more academic aspects of it. Through the 1980s I owned a small publishing house and an attached bookshop – my first taste of managing a business. It was also my first introduction to the arcane world of cataloguing, inventories, stock audits and customer service – experiences I took with me when I left the book-selling business for education and started building libraries in schools across the sub-Saharan country where I taught English.

My own standard of a 'livable space' (as many well-stocked bookshops and excellent libraries as possible, coupled with a vibrant café-scene and enough WiFi hotspots to allow me to engage in creative work while not stuck inside an office) made me rather dismayed to find that most of my colleagues and friends considered my wish to establish a bookshop in Queensland, Australia as an act of madness. They shook their heads and produced piles of doom-and-gloom articles, from e-books threatening publishers, to recession, to eBay causing huge drops in prices, to bookshop chains turning the whole exercise into yet another cut-throat supermarket experience. But what was really amazing in all this was the paradoxical nature of the advice. While all of them agreed that it was not a wise investment to open a bookstore, they all bemoaned the fact that there was not one close enough to them, and all of them were sizeable consumers of books themselves.

And while they wrung their hands in dismay and predicted the very Apocalypse of the Book, I kept walking into all kinds of bookshops in my city: independent, second-hand, sell-and-go warehouses, large chains, small chains, cross-selling or specializing, bricks-and-mortar, online or both combined – you name it, I have been in it. If these journeys have proven anything to me, it was one single fact: it is a long way to the Apocalypse.

I am glad that I did the footwork well before engaging in what I usually do when thinking of a business venture: read up on it. I spent six weeks talking to bookshop owners and staff, who were very generous with information and advice once that rapport between booklovers was established and assurances made that no competition will be opening in their nook of the world. I started reading after listening to many a story of success and demise – only to find out that the underlying reason for the predominance of doom-and-gloom stories is the fact that disasters sell better than success stories of hard work and dedication. There simply is no romance in such terms as 'keeping a solid, updated inventory', 'weeding your collection' and 'trips to the diseased estates'. Not unless you are passionate about dead people's junk, anyway.

So are booksellers and bookshops on their way out of the Western world? Are we ready to dump an integral part of what makes us civilized and cultured for the ephemera of electronic text? Will bookshops, with their aura of almost sanctity be replaced with mercenary eBay sellers often not knowing the true value of their merchandise and treating it the same way they treat T-shirts and plastic key-rings manufactured whole sale in some sweatshop in

southeast Asia? Are we staring the 'bookseller bubble' in the face?

My research and footwork inclines me to say a qualified 'no'; qualified because bookselling, like any other business, can fail for reasons personal and external which do not necessarily impact similar businesses. Where I can say a strong and resounding 'no' is to the oft-mentioned statement that the Internet (self-publishing, e-books and online selling) has been the main reason for the demise of the bricks-and-mortar bookshop.

I would like to point out here that I am not at the moment interested in huge ventures such as say, Borders. Although I often hang out in Borders or walk into other large Australian bookstores (Angus & Robertson, QBD, etc.), I do so less often than I drop into smaller, independent, second-hand and antique shops. The main reason is that the larger chains all stock the same stuff, very little of which is specialized in any way, and much of which is targeted at the lowest common denominator of readers – one-hit wonder novels, classics of English literature (not many translated works there), self-help for those who cannot tie their own shoe laces, true crime manuals for aspiring murderers and bored wives, street directories and books on how to fish from the lounge in your house. The staff is often overworked, does not express interest in the client and their knowledge of books and reading is equivalent to that of a 16-year-old in a supermarket: 'You right there?'

It is true that a few smaller chains are attempting a 'personalized' touch by adding 'customer VIP cards', offering discounts for loyalty and creating cafe nooks among the books. But whereas I would walk out of a second-hand bookshop with a backpack full of books and need a taxi to get home, I tend to come out of these chains with a maximum of one or two volumes and lighter of step and wallet despite the stack of VIP cards I own. As for buying anything from supermarkets that stock books as part of their merchandise, or from a newsagent, I would have to be seriously desperate. These outlets just do not seem to get the difference between 'book' and 'paper cut to size'. And as quite a few perceptive commentators have noticed, large chains are at a cut-throat battle with each other, selling their stock for so little that it would not make sense for an independent bookshop to try to imitate them unless they were seriously suicidal. While the dinosaurs fight each other in the large metropolitan centres, smaller independent booksellers can find niches in regional towns and more up-market, intellectually oriented and yuppie neighbourhoods where class precludes you from buying from a plastic-feel, neon-lighted chain totally lacking in that form of sophisticated ambience that feeds the intelligentsia's soul.

One of the most common complaints one hears from those specializing in obituaries for independent and second-hand bookshops is the advent of the Internet. Their reasoning runs along the lines that one can establish a bookshop online with minimal overheads, thus sell at lower prices undercutting the bricks-and-mortar competition. That, if anything, needs to be taken with heaps of salt. All of the booksellers whom I have met who still owned a bricks-and-mortar establishment were also selling online, but saw the open door of their bookshops as absolutely necessary. Their reasons? 'It brings in the stock' for the second-hand dealer; 'it lets us get to know the local clientele'; 'it makes the bookshop visible more than any advertising', etc. Not to mention the mantra of most serious book dealers, especially in the field of collectibles, that buying a book is a 'tactile experience'. I have to personally agree that I find much more pleasure in browsing through shelves, reading the dust jackets and fingering through the pages than when I purchase my end-of-financial-year stock of textbooks from Amazon or ABE Books.

So the Internet has not been the cause of the demise of bookshops. True, one is competing against thousands of other sellers, but one also has a potential world-wide market of millions of buyers. Electronic auctions, however, are a different kettle of fish altogether – here the sellers are not necessarily specialists in their field, as anyone can sell their deceased

grandmother on eBay, provided she is well conserved and the customs do not mind her being imported. Prices can be absolutely ridiculous, from \$0.99 for a paperback, and many perceive this as a competition hard enough to knock any respectable bookshop out of work.

I often bid on items on eBay, but so far have only purchased one book there, a nostalgia item from my teenage years that is out of print and I could not find anywhere else. On the other hand, if I were a bookseller myself, eBay would provide me with a whole range of exciting possibilities – a bibliographically challenged teenager selling his granddad's stack of dusty, moulding books has often been unable to locate a similar copy online for price comparison (provided he cared) and priced a book to the heart's content of a collector or book dealer not so challenged. Priceless gems valued in the thousands of dollars have been known to pop up on the eBay charts for a price in two digits.

So what makes an independent bookshop survive and flourish? The booksellers I have talked to repeat a number of important points: know your stuff, deal in what you understand, hone those people skills and develop trust with your clients. Tailor your stock to the readers, give your bookshop ambience and dare to be different, but not too much. Cross-sell, as long as the other items in the bookshop reflect the philosophy of your bookshop. And a philosophy it must have, just as it must have a system in place for inventorying and weeding your collection, managing your accounts and keeping up to date with the industry. All sheer business common sense.

There are bookshops that go out of business – not because the industry as a whole is doomed, but because the demographics changed and the owner's did not; because they did not grab the opportunities, did not travel with their antiquated collection into the XXI century. I have seen a few of those and heard of others. A bookshop with books on the floor, sagging and broken shelves, dust and an owner behind a stack of boxes, blinking like a bat blinded by daylight and not very sure what a buyer was doing in his little bolt hole from the world will not survive, Internet or otherwise. As a good friend and dealer told me over a beer: 'Sam, lots of people whose bookshops fail have no people skills. They think a bookshop is a great idea for a place where they can sit hidden from humanity, at which they snarl when it crosses their doorway. Of course they close down quickly.'

Oh, yes, one more thing: do not call your bookshop Armageddon! The Apocalypse, if any, is in the eyes of the beholder.

About the author

Sam Berner (B.Ed., Dipl. LIS, Postgraduate Diploma in Information Management) is a principal of the company ECognus (Brisbane, Australia). She is a knowledge management consultant, assisting small to medium enterprises to benefit the most from their intellectual assets. ECognus also provides services in the area of tailored software applications and the digitization of business processes.

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