

## . . . And Nevertheless, She Persisted: How Independent and Feminist Bookstores Have Survived in the U.S. Book Market

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### Abstract

The popularity of independent bookstores in the United States has been on the rise in recent years. This article explores possible causes of this phenomenon in the age of Amazon bookselling. Cultural circumstances of recent years are considered, such as Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election and the national response from the retailer perspective, as well as an overview of how independent bookstores have remained competitive in the book market, and the establishment and significance of feminist bookstores in this conversation. Primary examples of US independent and feminist-leaning bookstores discussed in more detail here include New York's Books Are Magic and California's The Ripped Bodice.

### Key Words

Independent Bookstores; United States; Books Are Magic; The Ripped Bodice; Feminist Bookstores

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## **Introduction**

When looking to browse books in a brick-and-mortar store these days, many people wind up at their nearest W H Smith, Blackwell's, or Waterstones in the United Kingdom, or their nearest Barnes and Noble in the United States. This is to say, book-buying customers visiting stores often find it most convenient to shop in their local chain bookstores. However, throughout the rising popularity of chain bookstores and Amazon's digital sales channels, independent bookstores have persisted. Over the past decade or so, gaining in pace since the inauguration of Donald Trump, independent bookstores have been on the rise in various cities across the US. In gaining a deeper understanding of the publishing field as a whole and the impact of booksellers in this cycle, it is worth exploring how independent bookstores have survived with advancing capitalistic and digital opportunities, such as Amazon and the big chain bookstores, and why book-buyers are returning to independent bookstores at this time. Publishers must remember: "The lessons learned by the independent booksellers that are succeeding are worth examining" (Underhill 2008, 89). One type of independent bookstore particularly suited for consideration here is the feminist bookstore. This essay aims to investigate the adaptability of independent bookstores in the United States, focusing on examples of feminist-focused stores, and possible causes of their growing success in today's market.

## **Staying Independent through Individuality**

One of the strongest points to explore when discussing independent bookstores in the United States is the question of how these stores have maintained a steady enough business to remain open, or allow newcomers to open their own independent stores, despite the prevalence of chain bookstores, the rise of Amazon, and the recession that hit in 2007-2008.

According to the observations of Paco Underhill, small booksellers are excelling at several key personable and marketing tactics many chain stores and Amazon may not have the means to achieve. As Underhill writes of the difference between brick-and-mortar booksellers and online ones, "[b]y browsing, we can get lost in a bookstore in a way we

never can on the Web” (Underhill 2008, 89). This alludes to the most obvious, physical advantage of brick-and-mortar shops: their physical presence and the way they may use their store space to entice readers to shop there. While many chain bookstores adhere to a synchronized, corporate look, such as Barnes and Noble’s tan and green décor, independent bookstores may tweak the layout of their store and their displays according to what consumers have expressed the most interest in at any given time. For example, California’s romance bookstore, The Ripped Bodice, offers a different window display according to what local and global events are appealing to their customers. Rather than create a customary window display of books relating to winter holidays, spring, or other days of note, such as Independence Day, the owners design and build a new window display every month, sometimes finding new uses for previous display crafts, but often seeking out new materials and repainting the window’s display wall according to the theme. For instance, in April of 2018, their window anticipated the UK’s impending royal wedding, as the owners and many of their customers have expressed excitement for the event. In this way, this small, independent bookstore is expressing a creative individuality, celebrating its shared interests with its readers, and catching the eye of locals and tourists, distinguishing it at a glance from any neighbouring chain stores.

One of the key ways in which independent bookstores have continued to appeal to customers, despite, perhaps, not being as convenient as the chains and digital retailers, is by excelling at specificity. As Underhill states,

In the face of Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Borders, independent sellers have had to take a hard look at their business. With margins on books modest and return policies in transition, the smart merchant has had to be different. (Underhill 2008, 89)

He continues by declaring one strong way in which independents have asserted their individuality in the crowded and varied book market: often, by focusing on specific genres and interests around which their stores revolve. Although some independent stores stock titles spanning a variety of genres and age ranges, several base their stock on rare books,

cookbooks, or romance novels. However, the stores cannot choose a genre, stock the shelves, leave it at that, and hope to succeed. Instead, they need to continue to engage with their customers via differentiation practices, offering a more personable customer relationship management strategy in order to form a friendlier bond with their customers than corporate chains or digital establishments can achieve. Ryan Raffaelli, a Harvard Business school professor currently studying independent bookstore businesses, sees independents as offering “a chance for the consumer to engage on a set of very personal dimensions” (NPR). Trachtenberg merges Underhill’s statement and Raffaelli’s view, of specific methods of customer engagement being key survival tactics. He writes:

“Competitive independents have learned survival skills, emphasizing service, in-store events and promoting local or little-known authors” (35). Here, he mentions another way in which these booksellers excel at engaging with their customers and their local communities: by hosting readings and events, often highlighting local talent.

One example of a local bookstore integrating readings and other bookish events for its community is Books Are Magic in Brooklyn, New York. Although a younger store in the neighbourhood, having opened in May of 2017, this Cobble Hill bookshop not only replaced the previous local independent bookstore, preserving a neighbourhood tradition but renovated the rooms and used social media to build interest in the store before opening. The owners used Instagram to share developments in the construction and preparation of the shop with their prospective customers. They also used social media as a channel to promote events run by the bookshop. When authors give readings, either within the store itself or at a larger venue booked by the store, the staff at Books Are Magic use Twitter and Instagram to promote the events at the beginning of each month, as well as at the beginning of the week in which the author is visiting and on the day of the event. Furthermore, now that Instagram offers the options of posting “stories” and video livestreams, the store will share clips of the author readings via both options, potentially drawing in locals during the event, or collecting the interest of viewers who may be curious enough to visit for future events.

Several independent bookstores offer in-store events on a regular basis. These events allow the stores to provide unique experiences for their communities. Often, they host events for which many chain stores, and certainly Amazon, do not have the personal connections, localized familiarity, and resources, as “[the] big chains do not have the capability to do anything more than cursory adaptation to individual areas” (Underhill 2008, 90).

Independent stores, on the other hand, frequently make a point to know and anticipate the pleasures, needs, and interests of their customers and neighbours, and spend more time working to meet those needs and interests on their shelves and in their stores. Social media promotion aids in spreading awareness of these events, and the independent bookstores’ various Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook accounts have contributed to the participants and audience members at their events. This has also helped to spread awareness of the shop and what it offers both across its localized community and at national, and sometimes even global book-centered groups. Expressing individuality also has allowed independent bookstores to invest in issues and cultural events in which larger companies have been less able, such as taking a stance on the divisive political and social movements racking American society.

**Local and Vocal Investment: the influence of cultural circumstances and independents’ agility and ability to voice an opinion on their reader-base**

In congruity with the ability of independent bookstores to remain agile as far as adapting their shop displays and customer outreach methods, independent bookstores are also more flexible when it comes to vocalizing support and opinions regarding issues about which their customers are concerned.

In January of 2016, Donald Trump was sworn in as the forty-fifth president of the United States of America. After a polarizing campaign, Trump’s election and subsequent inauguration caused further controversy and feelings of division in the nation. However, despite the grey outlook many citizens had, and continue to have, regarding Donald Trump’s term thus far, independent booksellers have also seen positive outcomes to the election, such as increasing sales and customer flow. Just as the sales figures of dystopian novels,

such as George Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* increased following the 2016 election, so did business in independent, and often outspokenly feminist bookstores (Asoulin 2018). According to a recent *Publisher's Weekly* article, there are currently fewer than ten self-proclaimed feminist bookstores in the United States, but several of these stores were "founded in response to the current political climate," and have gained both significant interest from their communities and increasing business since opening (Kirch 2018). One bookstore owner, Jan Weismiller, attributes the heightened traffic in bookstores during the Trump administration to one of the main functions of books, and the stores that distribute them: "to help people wrestle with life's complexities—political or otherwise" (Asoulin 2018). A perfect example of this would be the reception of *Fire and Fury* in early 2018.

*Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* by Michael Wolff was first released on Friday, 5 January 2018, four days ahead of its scheduled publication date. This early release resulted from Donald Trump's attempts to quash the book after *The Guardian* printed extracts in preparation for the originally scheduled Tuesday publication date. (Gambino, et al. 2018) The book quickly filled a display table of its own in many bookstores, both chains and independents, even in the UK, where its display table in Oxford's Blackwell's flagship stood close to the main entrance, making it difficult for shoppers to overlook. Asoulin discusses this relationship between the rising sales of political books and the current cultural and political climate in this way:

Bookstores across the country are reporting an increased interest in titles seeking to distil the political sphere through the voices of activists, feminists, academics, novelists, and even poets, as mostly liberal readers try to make sense of President Trump's election. (Asoulin 2018)

That these readers turn to brick-and-mortar stores to purchase these books may be representative of what Weismiller terms the "community space" that physical bookstores offer. With people familiar with the books for sale operating the stores, readers have someone with whom they can discuss the book and its contents right at the point of sale, or

as soon as they step into the shop. As independent bookstores often attempt to entrench themselves within their respective communities and, as Asoulin quotes Weismiller, “connect with all sorts of different local communities to keep it thriving,” independents already promote open dialogue and relationships with their consumers, making them a friendly, and even comforting place for readers seeking a safe haven during political discomfort.

Though booksellers believe the popularity of political books is just a response to the country’s political circumstances, books on topics related to the social and human rights concerns raised in relation to the current administration and some of its expressed ideology have seen their sales jump as well. Many of these are issues and movements for which independent bookstores have already expressed their support: those in favour of feminism and representation for people of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals in books, and movements against racism and gun violence. Being locally active businesses, many of the independents have been able to support these movements, even in small ways, within their local communities. For instance, Books Are Magic has a gumball machine, which they fill with gumball-sized containers filled with lines of poetry. The proceeds from the machine go to charities and movements such as Everytown for Gun Safety, UNIDOS Disaster Relief and Recovery Program (following hurricane Maria hitting Puerto Rico), and Planned Parenthood. Across the country, in California, The Ripped Bodice showed its support for the March for Life in February of 2018 by setting out boxes of spare cardboard from their shipments for protest signs. Though these are seemingly trivial acts, they reveal an active support for their customers and the movements that concern them, a personal touch their chain store competitors may not achieve, simply because they allocate their resources elsewhere or, as a branch of a corporate entity, cannot use the business to take strong political or social stands. Even with customized social media accounts, often with one for every location in which a branch of a chain store resides, customers still recognize the business as a corporate-owned entity, blurring them into one face rather than an individual shop shaped by the community around it, as many adaptable independent shops are. Some of the most adaptable independent bookstores, feminist bookstores, are rooted in political and social

action and have found ways to propel the feminist movement forward through their establishments.

### **Feminist Bookstores and their Legacy**

Bookstores seeing to the interests of women and femme readers, self-proclaimed feminist bookstores, have persisted in various areas in the US prior to the tumultuous 2016 presidential election. These stores are a component of a feminist-focused publishing cycle within the larger general publishing field's framework. In the 1970s, "most mainstream publishers [ ... ] were still reluctant to publish women's works since they considered that works by and for women were not profitable, or that their subjects were too controversial" (Onosaka 2006, 25). However, seeing a readership for books centred on women's concerns, and refusing to be daunted by the negative response of mainstream publishers, "women became their own publishers. They also started to create their own review media, distribution companies, and bookstores, in other words, a whole network of feminist publishing" (25). Using magazines, journals, and newsletters, women formed industries that printed and distributed the works they felt readers needed, and feminist bookstores today continue with the distribution segment of what Junko Onosaka refers to as the "feminist publishing ecosystem" (25).

Modern feminist-focused independent bookstores have taken what worked for these earlier women in publishing, and have honed it for the current day and their own purposes. Although not every women-run small bookstore has proclaimed itself to be "feminist" in name, the women running these stores prove through their businesses that actions and words carry more weight than labels. Two previously mentioned current independent bookshops co-owned and run by women are key examples from one side of the coast to the other. The first, located in Culver City, California, The Ripped Bodice, specializes in romance novels and is co-owned and run by two sisters, Bea and Leah Koch. The second, Books Are Magic, is a neighbourhood general interest bookstore in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn owned by author Emma Straub and her husband Michael Fusco-Straub. Before the 2016 election, and prior to the 2009 uptick in independent bookstores' resurgence of success in America, the



number of self-proclaimed feminist bookstores had dropped from over one hundred in the late twentieth century to less than ten according to a 2018 count (Kirch 2018). Those that remain, as well as those that have opened in the past three years, have found success in the current market, not only by using methods expressing both individuality and outreach, as explored in the first part of this article, but also by expanding upon circumstances which spark reader interest in certain topics, as mentioned regarding the election of 2016. However, these aspects strengthening the marketing of independent bookstores may be combined under one advantageous and persistent movement in American culture: feminism.

Feminist publishing sales channels, though significant in both the publishing and social activism spheres, have faced difficulties, just as independent bookstores have:

[ ... ] feminist booksellers, corresponding by mail with dozens of different small press operations, and witnessing the upsurge of various women's products such as books, calendars, periodicals, records, and posters, found out how labour intensive it was to get a single title from a single press. Keeping the bookshelves stocked was time-consuming and expensive. (Onasaka 2006, 37)

Though neither bookstore mentioned here includes "feminist" in its name, both appeal to this growing-yet-niche readership of feminists and other equal rights activists, through both the titles frequently on display and the paraphernalia, such as calendars, cards, and giftware, relating to the movements with which many independent bookstores have declared themselves allies.

The Ripped Bodice and Books Are Magic both use tactics Underhill mentions as particularly significant for independent bookstores to adopt, such as specialising in one particular genre. As the only romance-only bookstore in the US, The Ripped Bodice attempts to see to every aspect of the genre their customers may be interested in reading: from paranormal and supernatural romances to historical fairy tales to LGBTQ+ heroines and heroes. Additionally,

the Koch sisters share a diversity-in-romance report, which lists the variety of characters' backgrounds and lifestyles represented in romance novels, or lack thereof, from various publishers in the country (The Ripped Bodice 2018).

Books Are Magic uses trending technology and cultural events to garner interest from potential readers. They use popular social media tools, such as Twitter and Instagram, to update their followers on new releases, current displays, weekly events, staff book picks, and any other potentially exciting store-related news, while also creating displays and store designs that align with external events already interesting readers, with a personal twist. For instance, when *Fire and Fury* reached Books Are Magic's display tables upon its release, the booksellers hid the cover image of Donald Trump's face with pink paper, a teasing joke, but one also subtly signifying the feminist stance of the store.

Both shops sell merchandise and gift items relating to their book stock and store, a point Underhill raises regarding how independent stores stand out among consumers.

Furthermore, after Books Are Magic co-owner Emma Straub visited the Koch sisters at The Ripped Bodice, showing solidarity among female booksellers, her store joined theirs in using pink receipt paper, as a fun quirk, and a reminder that these stores are owned and run by women. These small touches and everyday sales choices qualify The Ripped Bodice and Books Are Magic as independent, feminist bookstores. Their rising profile in the US is a testament to how "women are taking center stage in the literary world," not only from the author and publisher perspectives, but also from the bookselling angle. (Asoulin 2018)

## Conclusion

Despite capitalism's advances when it comes to reaching customers and providing quick and satisfying shopping experiences at cheaper prices, methods for which Barnes & Noble, to an extent, and Amazon, to a larger extent, are known, independent bookstores have survived through these changes in shopping culture. Although there has been speculation about the independent bookstore's ability to persist in today's competitive market, these independently owned shops have found ways to remain relevant as a significant sales

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channel over time. By appealing to extenuating circumstances in society that have an effect on book culture, as all aspects of life have an effect on one or another segment of the publishing field and the genres offered in bookstores, independent bookstores have not only survived over time despite competition, but thrived in the current US market. These establishments have adapted into “cultural centers”. (Trachtenberg 2005, 37) In regard to feminist bookstores, and how their presence has begun to increase in both number and strength recently, this development may be considered the result of various factors.

The publishing field, in every branch, is not a cycle in a vacuum. Every current development rests upon the advancements and creative choices employed by a previous figure in the industry. Each is also shaped by the various socio-economic, political, and cultural factors, not only of the localized area in which the particular author, publisher, or bookstore operates, but also, increasingly in our well-connected and up-to-date world, at the global level as well. Independent bookstores alive and well today have remained so by using the tools and theories used by prior independents: adapting to cultural shifts and changes in customer’s interests and forms of communication, being in tune with the community in which they reside, and being a familiar, friendly contributor to that community, and offering a range of experiences relating to their core product, books, in the form of merchandise, events, newsletters, book clubs, and reading groups. Another aspect of this foundation, the cultural climate affecting readers’ interests, may seem left to chance or lucky timing.

However, it is the job of a successful bookseller to notice the environment in which they are selling, and how they may work with that environment, both aiding readers and benefitting the interests of their stores. Bookstores, and feminist independent bookstores in particular, have capitalized upon the political and social events and controversies in the United States in the past few years, adopting the role of supporter and informer by stocking titles relating to the election and various rights movements that have gained new energy and traction at this time. Still, other feminist bookstores have joined both the industry and conversation merely by opening their doors and establishing their presence in the market. The popularity of feminist bookstores, alongside the strengthening presence of independent bookstores in particular US locations, prompts the question of whether or not feminist bookstores will

survive over time, even after the current political furore dies down. This concern is rooted in the query regarding the durability of independent bookstores in a mass consumer market designed with profitability and customer ease in mind. When viewing these processes of independent bookstores persisting over time, and the variety of specialty independents doing so, in combination with the external national and global circumstances affecting these bookselling ecosystems, one may surmise that independent bookstores, including those with feminist mind-sets, have evolved over time to remain adaptable and agile in a shifting book industry. These qualities are assets which will help independents hold their own for years to come.

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